

FICTION AND VERSE FOR FACTUAL FEMALE FREETHINKERS

**Traveling Purse or Pocket Poems and Short Stories of Anne Hart
(b. 1941) © 1959-1979, 2008**

Synopsis:

Some, but not all of the poems and some of the short stories in this work present submission, rage and guilt seen through powerless and vulnerable people under stress. Corrosive and negating, the freethinker in each poem is the internalized voice of a parent setting a child free, or belittling his/her child, or coercing it into the ways the parent finds least offensive. The individual grows, transcends past decisions, and chooses to be a freethinker.

The heroines and heroes of the poems are always intense persons for whom life is a succession of traps created by spouses and themselves, by personalities that have the habit of confinement, but choose instead, freethinking.

These freethinkers begin to grow, nourish, and transcend from their parent's past passions of jailed lives—the desperate loves that go reeling in the most rebellious directions, love of career versus lack of career fulfillment, or the relationship of husband and wife raging and violent.

The most intelligent women are mindless in marriage, so unable to set limits that they are easily controlled by the threat of poverty or by their battering husbands, until they reach a point of freethinking.

They let themselves sink into the most abysmal misery, a wretchedness so total it destroys their ability to react at all, and then from that point transcend their choices to learn from free thinking how to stand on their own two feet and pull their own weight while being interdependent on their new choices.

They may bolt. But once free, they will do it all over again. Despite the intelligence of the characters in the poems, they never gain enough insight into themselves to get off the treadmill of submission, rage and guilt.

They think with the logic of the psychically jailed, for which even working is a process as closed as a knot. They retreat from knowledge into the huge abstractions of politicized sexism...until they become freethinkers.

Here is the anguish of characters doomed never to face their brokenness, never to say—I want, I need, but to conceal themselves in marriage where the most exciting thing is getting battered and being too agoraphobic to escape.

The characters in the poems feel that they are always liable to sink into a total passivity where they have no eyes, no mind, and no will. They are battered between their family's love and their ridicule. Each character becomes the person she hates most and then transcends past choices through free thought, possibilities, and alternatives.

These poems and some of the stories are protests against the human condition both for its finality and its rigidity due to conventional stereotypes in sex roles. The poems and stories are concerned in concrete ways with contesting the origins and ends of human identity and finding a voice of confidence and resilience by transcending past choices into freethinking, critical thinking, and restructuring the craft of creativity as a healing tool.

And then, in the stories that follow, they become freethinkers. The stories include male and female characters choosing to grow and transcend, achieve measureable results, and find rational solutions to their problems using free thought and exploring mind-body-spirit, creativity enhancement as a tool of change, debating symbolically Mother Nature and Father Time, and considering new science as a state of mind.

#

THE POEMS:

HOW FAR BACK IN TIME WERE MY GENES IN ICE AGE REFUGIA?

The redundancy and flux in my mtDNA
Shows you why I arrived perplexed today.
The tight curl of my ash brown tresses
Reveals sailing modular ontogeny's stresses.

Tolerating changes on the fly,
Neutral drift asked molecular drive why
I landed somewhere in the frozen sea
of genetic redundancy.

My inner, tangled bank whispered rules
Between consenting molecules.
Why such pleiotropy in my many modes?
And such kaleidoscopic codes for roads?

#

IS GOD LONELY WITHOUT A SPOUSE AND FAMILY?

How does God keep from feeling lonely
If there's only one stock to hawk?
With none of equal rank nearby only,

To whom does the Creator talk?

Is God universe-bound?

Did humankind plaster a parental skull
To avoid familiar feelings of growing dull?
Is God our elders from whom we seek
Protection from a timely peak?

Who created God as a singleton?

In man's image yet, with no room to grow,
God still won't be contained for show.
If life frames love, then Santa's eyes above
Distract us from worry so we'd heal instead of hurry.

Was God advertised that way?

To lift our mood and mind?
If life is equally diverse as a hermit's purse,
In whose image does design align?

Your multiverse or mine?

#

Let Me Take on Wall St.

Let me take on Wall Street in a chastity belt,
Should the writer be screwed on her throne.
Let me gulp my bonds like a patty melt
Should words peak in my throat on the phone.

I love
My Cisco, Yahoo, and Juniper stocks
Because they keep going down up
Like a salty sea of sanity
To check remiss reality.

And when they go down,
I shalt not drown, or sell or frown,
Or upward gush the race to rush
like lemmings to the edge.

Instead, I'll compound my legions
Of Ginnie Maes with cortical maze
Or dip my pen in softly fallen metaphors
To skate cleanly shaven buy waves.

#

LET ME PAUSE IN A MARKET SO BEARISH

Something strolled wonderfully right through the door.
Asking, "Where have we improved?"
Is there creativity on the Stock Exchange floor?
Has peristalsis in a time capsule moved?

Panopticons know all, so panopticon-bound,
Push technology became too rough, a midlist
When we all need a best seller, and so we found
The Web unrisks, unmasked, unmissed.

Search Engines' stock read, "Are We Still Number One?"
While investors traded from their online gazebo.
Dreaming of DVDs skipping crazily on a run,
Webmasters sold their placebo.

Computers streamline senses by masking noise.
At their exits, existence fades.
Ambient hums of Treasury bonds escape as toys.
Joy is social security, entertainment, and shades.

#

Song Lyrics of the Silk Road Healers

Not since Sarkel set on fire.
Not since Samandar moved to Spire.
Not since Khatun called Khagan, "Cutie."
Not Since Khazaria went to Kievan booty.
Not since Bulan turned from pagan.
Lit the candles, and became the Khagan.
Not since Svyatoslav went to hire

Pechenegs from his transpire.
Not since yarmaq coins were minted.
Not since isinglass trade was hinted.
Not since Khazars fought oppression.

Not since Atil sank in depression.
Not since Samandar went underwater.
Not since Byzantines married Khagan's daughter.
Not since Ha-Sangari converted the people.
Not since Balanjar became a steeple.
Not since the steppes stepped lively to a tune.
Not since Khazaria, did the sky ride the moon.

#

THE BELLYDANCER

Down Mai's heavy breasts burst ripe chestnut locks,
innocent as Eden and just as moot.
Men still toss money, but women throw rocks;
war has sapped and cankered them at their root.
She draws her own blood as part of the act,
and each man views the other with mistrust.

From her ruby navel poems contract.
In labor Shakespeare settles to brown dust.
Then, under booze's banner visions weft.
Impurities cover smiles like dead bones.
She rips her skirt to show how she is cleft
like the hoof of the devil smashed by stones.

#

ONE DREAM AWAY FROM HAPPINESS

My steno pool supervisor sets the gin down slowly at her feet
with utmost care, knowing that most things break.
And soon amid her tearful loneliness,
she, with her hand extended, drinks again.
Miss Jean! Love your rosary-wracked and wretched mom,
besotted and swollen like a finger smashed.
My steno pool supervisor enters her prayer tunnel each night
in the subways where the lisping of wheels
carve escape routes in the double-knit snow
full of mist, like evaporating stone.

Jean has poured her mom's whiskey down the drain,
and she expects to be struck in the face.
She stops, one dream away from happiness
and burning wires creep within her brain.
Missy supervisor beams down like an echo, telescopic eyes,
delicate as a watercolor wash.

#

THE OUTER LIMITS OF LONELINESS

My steno pool supervisor's body prepares for a famine.
her sobs inhabit a room
where she touches no one.
Behind a wall of fear,
tactile talcum's dusted
inch by inch on her crêpe skin.
She dreams of Mattress Mack
on whom she cannot re-warm herself
when urgent hunger
triggers another facelift.

Back in 1800 Costume Dramas
The late night movie didn't show the science hero I wanted to see. Instead,
the film showed that a boy knew about
the hole his mother drilled
in his wall—her secret door.

For a year she watched him
undress and lay his magazines
across his bed.
How could he explain?

She laughed,
plunging her finger in and out
of the drilled hole.

"I saw you from there,"
she laughed again.
—Saw you naked and alone.

He wrenched his mother's wrist.
Sobs convulsed his body.
"Shut up, you slut," he cried.

And he followed her, unaware
of the sashweight he took
from an open drawer.

The back of her knees
brushed the footboard
of his bed.

She crouched there,
her eyes wide with fright.
Drunken sounds twitched
from her stapled smile.

She tried to kick the sash weight
from his hand, but tumbled
across his bed.
His mother struggled upward,
clawing her son with razor-sharp nails,
and the sash weight
plunged harder and harder
across her skull.

The boy was unable to stop.
He fell across his mother's body,
begging forgiveness,
before he called police.
Turning back one last time
he put the pillow over her face.

#

BLAZING PHONES

I sleep,
reading the bright sun
backward, like a robot's prayer.
My will expands.

Then you answer
like an calving flume
on a gnawed hill.

The cold phone blazes

with your anger,
and I wake, afraid.

A velvet network of veins
behind my eyes halts.

My logic slides back and forth
with the iron,
folding, pleating,
my thoughts scattering
in a shrill forest of air

As I stitch loops around buttons,
sewing sagely in the crevices
of your swell-bottom seams.

#

AN UNDERGROUND RAILROAD FOR VICTIMS

Beneath the white-stemmed tree,
ladies of the afternoon
sit at the *Backslide Inn*
hearts filling with fear
like a layer of petals
sprayed with formalin.

You sit, a stranded hulk
hell-bent and born to speed.
A stranger's shadow
strikes the treadmill
in blind alleys of motel rooms.

Old leeches leaf through
the noon hours
to hang salesmen
by their itchy ears.

The burden of the Law
heaves the kittens on their hindlegs

in the wreckage of blankets.

What power you have,
wives of the night,
whores of the day!

You make men weep
and push their bowels empty,
their eyes turned up
so that only the whites show,
red-veined and dirty,
howling for mercy
under your needle-spiked heels
'neath your whips and black leather.

And at four
you come home to your children,
telling your husbands
the money came from
that real estate job.

#

BURLY MEN WITH PLAYPEN EYES IN CAVERNS OF CRITICAL THINKING

It is typical of women ...
waiting for answers
to come charging down
on white horses
instead of playing them out
scene by scene.

We study your playpen eyes,
and poke our noses
into your rancid marriages,
denied of crawling space,
blotted behind paper walls
where we hear your toilets flush.

You reach for a weapon,
telling us tonelessly,
"You rambled."
"There was nothing else to do."
We used our eyes in a theatrical way
and thumbed through your girlie magazines.

But—if we were to create wombs in men,
caverns of deep, physical thinking,
then we would risk our lives
for one moment of absolute power.

You see us in a pink mist,
our faces blurred by anger.
You gaze with those unfocused eyes
that forever stare at a point
above our shoulders.
We taunt you with our tongues
and swing our brittle legs
like fascists in pantyhose.

#

THE OTHER SIDE OF THE DIAMOND ENGAGEMENT RING

A seven-inch scar puckers
on Rosie's teenage belly
where never crippling fevers
will be unlived iron-eyed.

She's like an arthritic leg,
bent at the knee
with sinews like snakes,
yelling, "Today I died."

As a bride she holds
her dead mother's hand
as if it were still a part of her,
her years spent.

Without a trace of warmth
the groom rustles his bride
feeling formless as a zygote,
pushing past her slantwise tears.

A nomadic trail of light
spreads out through the room.
She lifts her lids a splinter.
The groom steps back as if asleep.

And in the mirror, bare to attack,
her belly laugh is like a fun-house statue.
Forced to view distortions from curved mirrors,
her grip with illusion is studied.

#

THE FORTUNE HUNTER

The husband hunter,
her thumb green after the kill
stands with gutted man
astride her hood.

Seeing a richer one coming,
her belly rolls in waves.
She stands erect,
straightens her tunnel,
her eyes water,
legs go stiff.

Quickly she empties his wallet
and gulps the cash
like air.

But her joy
is the seed
of her misery.

So she wraps him in paper

like potato skins
and tosses her garbage
where colleagues will connect to feast.

#

TRAVEL

Nightingales by the dozen
swarm to pick grapes.
Darkness falls in twenty coils
like a fat snake.

An American wife screams
for custody of her kids
but with no supportive family
she goes crazy.

The King, eagle of eagles,
squats in his suite picking at fleas.
His ursine lips
feel the thrill of mocha.

Oh, those traveling gals with cameras,
rise over deserted streets.
And swallow the bay of petrified homes
that watch oil wells flame money.

The rollaway moon splits whitely open
and night falls abruptly
on tense and tedious eyelids.

#

DISHPAN ALLEY GRANNY

A tee vee set's my only companion
dividing my days faultlessly between
the pit of moldy dreams
and the moment when

cold sweat curls my thin hair as I
settle behind dish pans.

#

THE PROGRAMMER AND THE CODE

Something was terribly wrong.
At three A.M. Overhead lights
in the main machine room were off.
But the console blinked a green glow.

There was an ambient hum
from the disk drives
masking all noise to the point
where existence ceases at its exits.

Obsolete tapes jerked crazily to my command.
I moved so slowly
until spheres of light
exploded on its black screen.

I turned the length of my thigh
contracted myself, porpoise-bellied,
afraid of change.

The stress of change leaped into my eyes.
Under my out-flung arm
Soon I would be not as much
as a crushed flower in time's path.

For the flower at least,
there is regret for its ended beauty,
For me, one genogram's code,
a random leap across square-jowled stalls.

#

GRAY LADY

I dreamed I am a doctor's wife,
And it is no bed of roses.
Deep within those pudding eyes

a baby's face grows old,
head to chest and knees updrawn,
snared in the barbed wire of time.

Light perishes the buds.
At seventy-five, she goes balder,
but has her tummy tucked
with the skin they removed from her face.

Like a dry rock
in a weedy garden
she holds steadfast
and seas of silver crash
(never moving her an inch
From her plushy-furnished home.
I dreamed I am a doctor's wife.
And then I dreamed I am the doctor.
And didn't need a grocery allowance.
And wasn't married to a miser.
And could cool or heat the house without permission.
But then I woke up.

#

OLD FANNY

The first of the month
all the old ladies
sat on their stoops
waiting for the mailman;
that monthly check
was all they got.

Despite her coat,

Fannie shivered.
A thin patina of snow
connected the street
with the same mutuality—
poverty and cold.

Fannie moved her pocketed pennies
back and forth over her trombone to shake the sound of a gourd.
She clicked her vinyl purse
open and closed,
grinning with a toothless, red slash.

#

HEY, CAESAR, BRAY FERROUS NOW

Hi, Caesar, full of face. Bray ferrous now.
The lore is witty.
Placid art. Dow, Hmong whim, and
Placid is the root of Thai-loom, cheeses.
Stay ferrous winners, now, and at the hour of
our wealth.

Hour fodder, which art in hair pin?
Halloween be Thai name.
Thai kinked dome gong.
Thai well being, fun
On mirth, as it does in airborne.

Give us disdain, our tallied breadth
And forget us our tresses past
As we forget those whose tresses past us.
For dime art's the tower and the story-lore, ever.

#

CHICKENIZATON

Have you ever noticed how often women investors are referred to as poultry? Young women are brow-plucking chicks. Married women ruffle feathers. They egg men on at work and cluck kids off to school. Mothers watch their broods.

Child rearing ends with the empty-nest syndrome. Their wives henpeck husbands at home. Runaway wives have flown the coop, while stay-at-home husbands feel 'fowl' cooped up.

The object of W.C. Fields' affection was "My little Chickadee." Married women feather their nests. She squawks her alimony is birdseed, but her ex calls her a vulture. "Wait 'till that poulet digs her talons in your wallet," grooms are warned. "She'll watch you like a hawk."

She scratches for a raise like a hen dancing on a turntable, going in circles to get visibility and recognition. Long experience makes her the sharp-beaked mother hen that trains younger males for her dream job.

In Arabic, a beautiful woman is a 'fistoo,' a piece of chicken thigh. Women are elder biddies, old crows, or Ladybirds. "She's no spring chicken," say men about mature women.

A sorority is called the "hen house." A woman alone is a sitting duck. Either her goose is cooked, or she gets goosed in a crowded elevator. An Amazon parrots the old toy's network. When her husband uses anger to get power, she walks on eggshells. To be feminine is to be chicken. Is it any coincidence that so many women's wages are chickenfeed?

#

EXTREME ULTRAVIOLET RIDES THE e-BEAM

To snap the lithography force field,
Extreme ultraviolet rides the e-beam.
Suspending ranks of molecules between electrodes,
She lets quantum particles compute in multi-universes.

She teleports matter, unleashing IBM on quantum mirages.
And Lucent works e-beams on code-name Scalpel.
Intel, AMD, and Motorola, and every other CPU maker,

Joins the parade of purses marching to EUV.

It's the end of the Silicon Cycle. Long live the smallest package.
Spin-up and Spin-down as the binary 0 and 1.
Quantum particles live in two places at once,
So my job as a retiree is to determine a value.

Wow! I am needed again after old age to decide
Which super-positioned state begets the logic.
What fun it is to be more than a molecular-scaled granny
With an MA in English and a shelf of unpublished novels.

#

One Book-End Cat of a Pair

A library cat, in double-knit sand,
The blue-eyed Bestet with Siamese slant,
One papyrus-wracked puff with cross-stitched mane,
Yawned Mary-wide 'neath a fall-away moon.

The day my financial security arched catly,
I saw and painted a clarinet chord as indigo velvet
And tasted a violin note as lemon chiffon meringue.
It sparked a peaceful pride like folklore.
An organ's chord snared the barbs of change.

Through tides of time purple velvet music pounds against
The blueberry mint silence of the dark.
With frozen gaze, caramelized onions in chocolate
Become the human condition with a touch of fennel.
Mice become cats.
Cats become men.
Men become mice.
And the cycle repeats in a circle.
'Till atoms no longer stick together.
Run home, optimistic book-end to craft
Your malachite mate from molten mire.
On guard to moods before a stage of hawks
Cats ascend the pyramids of chance.

Not knowing choice's planned out at the start.

#

SO WE MEET GENERATIONS LATER AS POETS

Hey, now Caesar with putty face
What did you do to earn your place?
And if you chose race over grace
Guess who took your parking space?

Hey, now Caesar, sharp as glass
Want to fix your social class?
You have a chance to start a school.
With breeze enough to keep you cool.

Are you anybody in the Wadi
Spiced as a toddy?
Why be naughty?
What do you think when you smell a cross?
Why remorse?

Don't misread sacrifice for sacred dice.
In your world, evil comes disguised.
And it's wrong to run from joy of life.

You don't have to be the Granite Messiah
To dance with your lyre.
Lead yourself into salvation
By the tune of invention's station

#

The Time that Land Forgot

The time that Land forgot,
He tomcatted his paws to
Gentle Lynx Lamotta, a
Courtly orange tabby,
Fourteen weeks old.

The cat who loved Christmas
also loved Ramadan, Hanukkah,
and the festival of Vishnu, the Creator.
All fluff and fur, on down-padded sills,
Meowing like finger zills,
To the tune of megham-seekah.

Lynx had a routine for everything.
Blinking in surprise, he meowed his
Way to becoming a Library cat.
A cat in every bookstore...
Curled up in the sun, beaming out the window,
Two copper eyes, Himalyan fur,
and the face of a Ragdoll to ring in the readers.

#

TRADING ONLINE IS NEITHER POSITIVE NOR DIMENSIONLESS

Trading online is like dancing on the moon.
Your only enemy is gravity.
No matter what I buy, I'll play a tech tune.
My friend is speech recognition concavity.

I bought the wireless way to play
When the Web was a spinning bubble.
Higher interest rates are here to stay.
Mice in the seams of time spells trouble.

How many dollars have I to snare
Before barbing the biz-wire of strength?
With too much time and too little care,
My savings are points of zero length.

I've outlived my stash and can't "fine" the cash to get me past moments
without duration.
I've paid my homage to the clock
And teethed on a narrow ration.

A bag lady I am, am I? A bag lady in debonair shorts--
Buying stocks with charisma to sell to this Ma while broadcasting sports in
food mall courts.

#

YOU NEOLITHIC FARMER, YOU!

You neolithic farmer, you.
How dare the twenty-six percent of you
Pinch my paleolithic peace proportionally,
Reducing my six-foot height with your polished grain,
To five-feet; turning my whippet-wiry O-negative blood
Into your barley-thickened A-positive agglutinated sludge?

How dare you expand from your lion-wracked pedestals
Planting my beech forests with your carbs?
A mitochondrial cluster adding lustre?
And your speech, so nostratic, it's demotic.

Adding more haplotypes, what a demic diffusion.
My diet of salmon and berries produces less insulin
Than your pot-belly forming candy infusion.
Genetic drift has caused a rift in my shift.

We're temporary containers and strand strainers.
So together let's map our clades in shades of grades.
Can I keep my own menu, please, you eaters of cheese?

#

Khazars

Not since Sarkel set on fire.
Not since Samandar moved to Spire.
Not since Khatun called Khagan, "Cutie."
Not Since Khazaria went to Kievan booty.
Not since Bulan turned from pagan.
Lit the candles, and became the Khagan.
Not since Svyatoslav went to hire
Pechenegs from his transpire.
Not since yarmaq coins were minted.
Not since isinglass trade was hinted.
Not since Khazars fought oppression.
Not since Atil sank in depression.
Not since Samandar went underwater.
Not since Byzantines married Khagan's daughter.
Not since Ha-Sangari converted the people.
Not since Balanjar became a steeple.
Not since the steppes stepped lively to a tune.
Not since Khazaria, did the sky ride the moon.

#

The Day My Whole Country Turned INFP*

The day my whole country turned INFP,
the abstract optimists leapt.
The concrete sensors slept.
The sky rode the moon
Like an idealist on a novel.

The day my whole country turned INFP
The heavens crept
With the spark
Of the introverted feeling word,
The lark, the chord,
The Light in the dark,
The photon and the quark.
The day my whole country turned INFP*,
'Twas a day of creative expression

And a moment of extroverted intuition.

*INFP= Introverted Intuitive Feeling Perceiver on the MBTI (registered),
one of the world's most popular indicators of personality types.

#

The Webmaster Says Creativity Is Peristalsis in a Time Capsule.

Creative writing is peristalsis: a progressive wave of contraction
And relaxation by which contents are forced onward.
Writing full time from home is a horizontal expression
Of the vertical desire to move up by reaching across time.
Creativity is peristalsis in a time capsule.

The Webmaster says, all tucked sleepless in his chair,
Counting DVDs skipping crazily to commands.

What if every writer asked, "Are We Still Number One?"
Existence ceases at my computer's exits.
Push technology came to slough, a midlist,
When this writer needs escape as entertainment.

Panopticons know all, so writers panopticon
Personal broadcasting networks as social security,
and something strolls wonderfully right.

#

TOTEMS OF LIGHT: OH, I WISH I WERE A TRADER IN CHICAGO'S BOND PITS

Oh, I wish I were a trader in Chicago's bond pits
Skateboarding Cats of the Dow by candle might.
Pencil-sharp drum sticks would tattoo comic novels,
When the Fed dangles interest rates like silver earrings.

See Shell's yellowed rose gap down on each Lochness Monster.
When oil drillers bloom, a plastic world flies to quality CDs.
Quan Yin, who can't reincarnate 'til we all return,

writes covered call options.
Picture-postcards caricature mind-mates beneath a rollaway moon.

Photos of kids transient as ticket stubs bank time capsules,
Only to be spent later on totems of light for bronzed chimps.
Collected poems evolve to panopticons of memory.
Mis-education stores righteousness in opal rings.

The Internet is Wall Street with Convictions
The Internet is Wall Street with convictions.
Where have we improved?

Push technology came to slough, a midlist
when we need a bestseller, and so we found
Escape as entertainment,
learning as fun, panopticons as all-seeing eyes
that broadcasted social security as personal theater.
Something scrolled wonderfully right.

An ambient hum from the modems
masked all noise to the point
where existence ceased at its exits.

#

THE BUSINESS OF BONDS

There's trading room on the Web, even for a bond.
Still it huddles half-afraid, its eyes Wall Street-wide, competing
for less leisure loaned.
Bring on your stockbrokers, unparagoned.
Drive in the economists, impelled and unowned.

Let rational traders plan throngs of the wise
To bulbous investors unafraid to upclimb.
Our Dow-cloistered voices peal macabre guise.
Bonds peaking too early snare on the barbed wire of time.

To sell your stocks online, first animate pregnant ads
Disguised as direct response sales letters.
Under your security's current fads,

Sound will crush text in its path, a ballet leap across square-jowled betters.

To sell stocks as entertainment, sell mutuality chapters.
Bonds sell environmental histories of property risk.
Midlist brokers need super sequels as time captors.
Showbiz, let it be, and forever, temerity. So runs the disc.

#

THE BUSINESS OF FICTION WITHIN THE FICTION OF BUSINESS

There's room on the Web for the business of fiction.
Still it huddles half-afraid;
Its eyes Mary-wide, competing for less leisure loaned.
Faction seized control of sweeping buzz appeal
To hawk memoirs as entertainment,
And sell mutuality, fiction must play "What's My Conduit?"

Bring on your scriptwriters, full of face.
Drive in the novelists, impelled by supernal mind.
Let the romance writers arc their throng of shoals
To bulbous avatars not afraid of change.
Our Web cloistered voices in macabre guise.
Stories peaking too early snare on the barbed wire of time.

To sell your fiction online, first animate pregnant ads
Disguised as direct response sales letters.
Under your Web channel's outflung arm,
Sound will crush the text in its path,
A ballet leap across square-jowled screens of time.
Juggle moments without duration.

Behold the flowering of universal mind.
Showbiz, let it be, and forever, temerity. So runs the Web.

#

THE STORIES

Five Multicultural Short Stories for Female Freethinkers

By: Anne Hart.

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For further information, read Anne Hart's books of short stories and instruction in short story writing titled, *Who's Buying* which popular short fiction now, and what are they paying? How to write, customize, and sell tales online or on paper. ISBN number 978-0-595-47252-9. Published 2007 by eye universe incorporated. See the Web site www.iuniverse.com.

Or read Anne Hart's novel titled, *DOGS WITH CAREERS*. This book contains an entire novel under one cover as well as numerous short stories. Published 2007 by eye universe incorporated. See the Web site www.iuniverse.com.

The author's web site is at: <http://annehart.tripod.com>. See also: <http://eptd.blogspot.com> and Storyteller's Resource site at: <http://talesforholidays.blogspot.com/>.

And now, here are Anne Hart's five multicultural and/or historical short stories.

1. The Incendiary Client.

"Every wife is a mirror of her own husband's failures, and every husband a victim of his wife's success."

The Incendiary Client

Beirut's winding alleys led me to the Antiochian Orthodox quarter to make a documentary video with client #9 on teenage rebellion faced by grandparents raising grandchildren in war-torn Lebanon. My client's issue focused on being a rebellious *only* grandson. We agreed not to use any names—only client numbers to communicate with one another.

As a traveling documentarian, finding creative solutions to problems of war focused now on incendiary star-crossed soul mates from past lives that married again in this life. I'm a videographer acting as a catalyst, bringing people together with the goal of obtaining measurable results for couples and families in distress.

My first documentary production experience in Beirut dealt with Client #9. "Do you want to know how violent groups infiltrated the international UFO scene?" Client #9 complained in her loudest Aramaic accent as she pushed a publication under my nose. I noticed she didn't speak to me in the vernacular Arabic but resorted to Syriac/Aramaic dialects to see whether I neatly fitted into her private circle of friends that had migrated to a place in Michigan that probably has more first to fourth generation Lebanese immigrants than urban Beirut.

Client #9 slowly opened the door. I peaked inside. She beckoned me to follow.

"I'm not deaf," I laughed in her rare dialect of Christian Syriac/Aramaic as I blocked her flying spittle with my business card. "If you hired the hate squad, *habeeby* (*dearest*), this time you're looking at the love squad, and the camera is rolling."

"No," she said emphatically as she handed me a *mignonette* of jasmine. "I wanted you to document on video my son's connections."

The men who came to strangle Client #9 were shrinking her world like the most delicately tinted of bubbles, shrinking in ever narrowing circles from the upward gush of her own infancy. Her room was empty. Client #9 sat on the unmade bed, a wreckage of blankets.

"You've got to be crazy to see a psychiatrist," I told Client #9. Why on Earth did you call a 70-year old recluse with an expensive video camera and zero connections when you could have called my son, the psychiatrist? Well, you probably asked for me because you're a retired chef. So you must have good taste. But don't call me if you're gnawing on a bad day or caught fava bean fever, and all you want to do is have a discussion over a bowl of *fatoush*. I'll call you."

"Girgis's room..." she puffed on a cigarette. "Like I told you on the phone, curiosity skilled the cat but turned the rat into *kibbee nea* (*chopped meat*).

Client #9 yanked a pair of electrical outlets from the wall. "Anyone can buy these from surveillance stores in your country's shopping malls. But here in Beirut, we need contacts in the American media, like you, Missus American Greek lady. Your doctor friends ought to use the media wisely to prevent malpractice suits or accusations." She plugged an appliance into the socket to

show me how her own “spy camera” camera is built to operate from the tiny hole in the middle, even when the socket is plugged.

"I know." I laughed nervously. "I'll show you my night goggles if you show me yours." Client #9 showed me how her own tiny camera was built at the back of the electrical socket so it could video record or photograph anyone in the room from any angle, like a third eye. It fit inconspicuously into the wall in the center of an aquatic mural, hidden by an angel fish.

"Only in black and white for now," she said. "My husband, Client # 10 has spy cameras imbedded in the electrical outlet sockets of every room in our house. He's keeping an eye on my grandson, Girgis."

On top of Girgis's bed were European 'girlie' magazines with nearly nude centerfolds. She picked up her grandson's magazines and peered. Client #9 shook her head, annoyed. Then she tossed the magazines neatly into one of her twenty-two-year-old grandson's dresser drawers.

Client #9 asked me to follow her downstairs, where she grabbed an electric drill from the utility room. She ran back upstairs to her own bedroom. Client #9 tossed an old family portrait from her bedroom wall. Her room adjoined her grandson's. She drilled a hole and then stuck a darkly painted camouflage band-aid over it. Client #9 peered through the hole, blowing away the powdered plaster and drywall.

"What'd you do that for?"

"You want to observe Girgis, don't you?"

"No, not that way. You're the one who wants to spy on your grandson. How come his mother and father are in America and he's living with you and your husband, here in Beirut?"

"His parents are trying to establish their medical practice—to save money and bring him over. They can't have any more children. It's difficult for immigrant doctors to pass those state exams in a new land.

Was the woman a victim of elder abuse? I wondered. At that moment, Girgis did walk through the front door downstairs. We heard him come in alone.

Client #9 rushed downstairs, frantic. "Where the hell were you last night? You weren't in your room this morning."

"Why do you always want to get your own way?" Girgis yelled back.

"What sacrifices a grandmother has to make for her grandson's education," she whined. "He's twenty-two and should be finished with college by now."

I asked Client #9, widowed only two years prior, why she recently married Client # 10, her second husband. Before she could reply, Client # 10 walked in. "My wife marries men for their shock value," he answered for her.

"All my children immigrated to Michigan," she said timorously. "In Beirut, an invisible woman can get desperately lonely for conversation at my age."

"Client # 10, you're my dad reincarnated," Client #9 shot back. "You're not my Client # 10. Some *shaytani*, some devil's got into you. No, you're not the Teddy Bear I married."

"Maybe you two are just incompatible personality types," I interjected as I watched Girgis run up the stairs to his room and bang the door shut.

Client #9 shuddered at the noise. "If the neighbors hear you howling, bitch, I'm going to give it to you upstairs," Client # 10 said.

"In front of the documentarian?"

"How does she know what I'm going to *give* you?"

Client #9 blushed. "You are my father reincarnated. When I was born, the doctor phoned my dad at two in the morning to tell him my mom had a girl. He told the doctor to look twice. 'Are you sure it's not a boy?' he asked."

"Shaddup, shaddup, you slut, you *sharmutter*. The neighbors will hear you." Client # 10 barked. "You're going to make me kill you."

Client #9 ignored him and looked me straight in the eye for sympathy. The more sympathy she could get from me, the more she manipulated him with pity.

Client #9 tried to force even more pity on each family member so I'd give her a ride someplace or offer a job referral. She said she wanted financial independence so she could leave, but did nothing to create it saying she was alone and nobody wanted to hire her.

"Why do you speak to me only in commands," Client #9 sobbed.

"How else can I get work out of you?" Client # 10 usually answered a question by asking one.

"Isn't it funny how our marriages always turn out to be like our parent's no matter how far we travel in space or time and try to be different?" I said.

Client # 10 went upstairs to the bedroom he shared with his son. It takes quite a man to give up the marriage bed to his son, and quite a woman to give it up to her absent niece's daughter.

The home was strictly sex segregated. Client # 10 and Girgis shared twin beds placed at opposite walls in one room that adjoined the room Client #9 shared with her widowed niece's nine-year old daughter. Her niece had left the country hoping to bring her daughter to America when that niece's older brother in Michigan could find steady work, save up, and afford it. No matter how bad client #9's new marriage went, those two types—her and her new husband, Client # 10, would be hardest to separate. In their mood swings, they could kill each other.

My reclusive clients as a couple were so star-crossed in personality preferences that they behaved like photographic plates, stamping each other with a compelling tattoo of put downs to pick themselves up, fault-findings, and criticisms.

"Timid men make the most violent wife beaters," Client #9 whispered in my ear, away from both of our rolling video cameras. Every member of this family had a video camera, and each recorded every word and movement of every other family member when they could. Not only had the phone been tapped, but the walls had holes with spy cameras in every room, even the room with the Turkish toilet—two painted footprints on the floor with a hole in the center of the floor.

They observed everything and turned it inwards, putting themselves down, calling the partner a loser, and finally, bursting with violence when they cycled into a depression.

When bored, the royal game of *Ur* circa 3,000 BCE came into play, a chip off the ancient Egyptian game of *Senet*. Girgis marched down and joined us in the largest room. "How come tonight is *backgammon*? Why can't we go bowling anymore?" Girgis asked.

"Because my next door neighbor says she too old to bowl," Client #9 said sarcastically.

"If it isn't backgammon with the elderly widows from your do-good club, it smells like fried onions for dinner with your old lady friends," Girgis added.

"They make me feel so young sitting next to them."

"Why can't we go to America? Why can't I play computer games?"

"You're needed to help us carry the heavy packages."

It was obvious Client #9 controlled Client # 10 with an iron hand inside of a velvet glove. When he was free of her a few hours a day, he went way over the limit.

"I like you Girgis," I said meekly.

He exploded. "I hate this big, book lined room where you play. I hate the big, cold fireplace, and your stupid potted plant. I hate everything in this room. I want to go to America so I can become a television newsman."

"Girgis. Don't do this," I said with conviction. "You're coming to live with me and my documentary production staff to see how it works out. After all, I'm paying for your film school training so you can learn travel video production from my team. What else can I do to help people after I've reached this decade?"

"I hate everything in this room, from the copper cauldron that holds the kindling you never use to the dumb statue of a cat that has a history I've heard a thousand times."

Girgis ran to the mantelpiece and tossed everything to the carpet. He took a vase with a candle in it and threw it in Client #9's head.

Client #9 ducked, but the vase flew through the window.

"He's being ugly," she whined to me.

Girgis ranted on in his own dialect. "Last time it was the two deaf ladies from the senior club with whom I had to play cards. I'm so lonely; I could die if anything comes between me and my goal of being a highly-paid television journalist—an international correspondent working around the world." Suddenly he was ashamed of what he'd blurted out.

Girgis looked at me shocked that I'd see inside him. Client #9 poured some orange juice into several glasses and handed me and him a glass.

"Please, let's all cool it," I sighed.

The juice stood on the table untouched. "I hate the two, long, watery juice drinks that have to last through the night," Girgis teased, twisting his mouth. "I hate the phony smiles in this room. You're all laughing at me. I'm sick of the fake formality you go through after every backgammon game."

"You've done pretty well tonight helping him to talk, to open up like a woman," Client #9 complained. Everyone's camera stilled rolled and recorded every nuance of foresight, insight, or hindsight. "Here are some pitfalls to avoid," I began. But Girgis cut me off in mid-sentence.

"All I see are phony, stapled smiles, like costumed belly dancing dolls," Girgis continued. "Two red dots on each cheek."

Client #9 couldn't show anger. "Maybe if you had to go out and work for a living instead of living for the moment," she admonished her grandson.

"What about you--smoking five packs a day?" He shot back sarcastically.

"You worry me so, I have to smoke," Client #9 cried. "It's a stimulus barrier to the pain you cause me."

Girgis took up his orange juice glass. "Shove your guilt trip. I want something of my own."

That was the first faint surge of triumph he'd felt all evening. "Nothing makes a grandmother angrier than to have her teenage grandson argue like an old hen," Client #9 said.

"Tonight I'm ready for a fight," he said.

"You control every facet of his life. Why doesn't he date girls his own age?" I asked Client #9.

"That's your American way. Here in Beirut, we don't date the same way as you folks do in America," she replied.

"The little bastard's ruined my whole evening," Client #9 said. "Why won't he allow me a life?"

"Allow?" I hesitated.

Client #9 broke out in tears. "Does he expect me to say 'My dear little baby, don't grow up?'"

"Client #9," I said. "Girgis is asking what abused children always ask."

"What's that?"

Girgis walked toward his grandmother. She put her arms around him.

"If I die, then will you love me, mommy?" He whispered to her, and then repeated himself facing the rolling video camera, my camera, not hers.

Girgis broke down in tears. "Tell her, Client #9. Tell her."

Client #9 blew a long sigh through the serrations of her lower teeth. "We just found out today. Girgis has been diagnosed with multiple sclerosis--M.S."

His face wrinkled, squeezing his eyes shut as he crumbled, sobbing at my feet. "I don't want to hop off the railroad at this stop," he sobbed. "I'll never be a man."

Client #9 poured the glass of juice over the back of his neck. "You wimp, you *mamhoul*, get up. Thousands of people run businesses with M.S. You must be a man."

"I'm going to end up in a wheelchair."

"How would you like to make me a list of international Presidents who ruled from wheelchairs?"

"My brother has been in a wheelchair since birth, and he's working on his life-long learning and career just fine," client #10 interrupted.

"It must take a lot of doing to win all that strength over into your own corner and then go on eating at the same table, living normally day to day," Client #9 told me.

Girgis rose and looked at me. "You're too damned good at everything, like my grandma is--hitting a tennis ball or running a documentary production company or cooking dinner for twelve."

"You should be proud of everything like that. Tell me about your mom in America, Girgis. When I was your age, talking wasn't an option," I said.

Like a thorough bred horse, Girgis couldn't resist the challenge. Before Girgis could open up to me in front of Client #9, she interrupted and cut him off in the middle again just as Client # 10 did the same to her.

"You're emotionally absent just like your old man, the sonofobitch."

Girgis shut down. "Where's daddy, where's the sonofobitch?"

"The sonofobitch is gone." Client #9 laughed.

"What are you thinking, Client #9?" I asked.

"About my father who always chased me yelling, if I catch you, I'll cripple you. Now I got a crippled grandson."

I tucked my business card into her top pocket. She twisted her mouth into the same grin Girgis used. The cameras kept rolling.

"You notice that crooked smile on your new husband?" I pointed it out to Client #9. She giggled. "Oh, that. Girgis taught him that. He saw it on Tony Perkins in 'Psycho' in the dubbed rerun over here at the theater. It's so weird, that it's funny. You don't get those foreign movies here in Beirut very often."

Client #9 motioned with her head to leave the room. She followed me downstairs to Girgis, who had fallen asleep on the sofa. "I got another bomb to lay on you, besides finding out about Girgis's M.S.," she announced in the tiny, threadbare kitchen. "You have to save your own life."

How could I tell her that she had to really love herself and respect herself to deal with all the stress? How could I treat this war on a family level when a bigger war was going on outside the door, a war of hatred between the haves and the have-nots, the culturally different, and even the planets? As much as war stank, it was responsible for the evolution of technology. That bothered me a lot.

The last time Client #9 and I did lunch at a posh hotel at my expense, with the camera rolling of course, an old lady got ahead of her in line as we waited in the hot sun for a seat. It was in one of those fancy business lunch places in Beirut where men in black suits closing deals are given preference over two mature ladies in wide-brimmed hats made of wheat stalks.

Client #9 grabbed the lady who cut in front of her and screeched, "Get out of my way before I push in your face." All that inner rage exploded. At home, Client #9 was incapable of showing anger. Instead, she'd make you feel guilty by prying your sympathy at how sick she was. With a total stranger whom she was sure of never seeing again, Client #9 pinched, shoved and stepped hard on toes.

All the anger she banked for years was suddenly spent on a stranger.

Client #9 lighted a cigarette, and I pulled it out of her mouth.

"Quit now."

She changed the subject. "We're placing power in sick hands. Half the men I know who earn a lot of money have slapped their wives around or worse. The poor half does the same sometimes, but the wives don't speak up. The wives of the powerful men speak up to me."

"Architects create domestic violence by creating cages too small for a couple to hide in. Everybody knows two monkeys in a cage bite each other. So do two people in a 600-square foot residence," I said sheepishly.

Client #9 was a little doll face with blood-red lips. "Do I have to drive a stake through his heart to stop him from bothering me?" She always asked me this kind of a question. Then she answered it herself with a 'but.'

"Would you want to have your daughter marry a man exactly like the man you married?" I added. "Just walk out with your own kids and don't turn back. Girgis wants to come live with me and learn the television journalism and documentary production ropes."

Client #9 choked on her ice water laughing so loud, so strained, and so fake. She pleaded with me to spend the night. "I'm afraid of Girgis," she sobbed. "He's cruel--like my first husband, and just as penny-pinching. No matter how far I travel to find a nourishing, slow-to anger man who's different, I end up marrying a disgruntled cheap skate just like my own wife-beating step father."

The guest wing provided me with Client # 10's movie studio affects. There was that gaping hole in the wall covered by a portrait or mural between Client #9's bedroom and Girgis's. And in my room, the same hole had been filled by the lens of an industrial-quality video camera. Whoever inserted the camera had mass duplication on his or her mind. They wanted me to see, and probably, the public, most likely the international news networks.

Late that night, all was quiet. I awoke around 3:00 in the morning from too much sugary pomegranate juice and curiosity on the brain, and peered through the lens into Client #9's room.

That cat woman of a 75-year old invisible grandma undressed slowly in front of the camera, knowing I could be watching, perhaps hoping. I wasn't quite sure yet of her motive. I could only assume she wanted me to watch and video record how Girgis treated a lady, his grandmother.

Client #9 was made up to look like a cheap, aging whore. Her black satin pushup bra and lace bikini panties dug deeply into her flabby, cottage cheese textured thighs. She looked like a comic caricature of her grandson's foreign girlie magazine centerfold.

The makeup she slapped on her mature face looked like a clown, like the character, *Sweet Charlotte* in a 1964 American Betty Davis film about a child star grown mature. Her brassy pink and orange-hennaed white hair flopped under the mirror lights. Black eyeliner ran down her lower eyelids into the creases in the bags under her eyes. I pressed my finger on the red 'record' button, and the camera rolled feverishly under the blaring light bulbs capturing the eye liner melting into the creviced bags under her eyes.

Across the wall was a second camera. I ran to peer through that camera, and started it, also, when Client #9 left her room and began banging loudly on Girgis's bedroom door. The second camera's wide, fish-eye lens peered through a hole in the wall in Girgis's bedroom. Most certainly Girgis knew I was here, and the cameras were here, and I would edit the video. Client

#10 tapped every wall, every room, every place in the tiny, decrepit flat; cameras rolled everywhere, except inside the toilet.

I wondered why the hell each adult family member wanted me to tape him or her in each person's room for an obvious network news broadcast? There was no sign of Client # 10, who shared the twin bed on the opposite wall with Girgis. The niece had been sent to spend the night with other relative and their same-age children.

I noticed none of the bedrooms or the bathrooms had locks. The video tape rolled as Client #9 pushed open Girgis's unlocked door. He growled. "What the hell do you want?"

Client #9 touched him on his bare shoulder. He looked up and ran to close his night stand drawer. As I peered through the lens, taping his grandmother's communication attempt (we had discussed in therapy), something went chaotic. Nothing can be planned to go a certain way. There are always the laws of chance, the unforeseen, or the unstable. There's always something going awry on the fractal curve of life's number game.

Girgis had a packed suitcase on the bed. Girlie magazines lay sprawled and open across his comforter. Client #9 looked down at the centerfolds. The camera picked up one magazine whose cover depicted a bruised, nude, beaten-down girl chained eagle spread to four bedposts wearing a Swastika armband and a nipple ring. The image of torture sent chills of revulsion up my spine. What's so sexy about pain? I thought. Love isn't supposed to hurt, but this wasn't love.

Client #9 grabbed the girlie magazines from Girgis's hands. She quickly thumbed through the photo layouts. "Girgis, this is sick. Why don't you get yourself a real girlfriend, a best friend?"

He moved backwards, tearing the magazine from her grip, and flinging the pulps into his dresser drawer. He slammed the draw shut with vengeance.

"Do you honestly think these pictures will give you back your manhood?" Client #9 laughed at him.

"Only my disability stands between me and my manhood."

He reached out to touch her, but she jumped away. Girgis took her in his arms and shoved her against the wall, forcing her bony, frail body back as if she were a crumpled, rag doll. She had some feistiness in her yet and pushed him away.

"It's wrong. So terribly wrong," she said sarcastically.

Hopelessly, raised his fist to belt her in the kisser, but decided to push her away. She bounced on the bed and backed out his door. "You're a bitter, old bag," he ranted.

The words "old bag" ticked her off. Client #9 exploded in anger.

"What have you been doing with those hate groups? And now you buy that foreign garbage that puts women in chains and gets off on their pain. The price of that magazine could have been spent on your college education during these past four years."

"I'm without any money of my own," he yelled, turning to leave the room, but she blocked his path and grabbed his shoulders. "Why can't you look me in the eye? Why can't we talk anymore? You're not my husband. You're my little baby grandson. We can talk. We can be friends," she demanded and manipulated with a dominant tone in her voice.

He began to wash his hands in his bathroom sink. "You forgot to use soap," she snapped.

That mothering command pushed his fury icon. He flung her into the wall, and her head knocked a portrait to the carpet. He looked up in surprise to see the hole she had drilled in his wall leading to hers. Girgis ran over and poked his finger through.

"You old bitch," he ranted. "You spied on me all this time. You were always watching me."

"Since my new husband and I were married, I drilled holes to watch you--and him. I watched you howl with pleasure over those magazines, and when you were away, I watched my new husband and you together, looking at the girly pictures. My husband wouldn't look at me if I stood naked in front of him, of course. He told me my fat stomach squeezed into lace corsets made him want to puke." She sobbed loudly.

"Shut up. Shut up you filthy *sharmutter*."

"You wasted yourself on those paper dolls just like my new husband throws himself at his sickening whores and flicks. He only wanted the little money my first husband left me. And to think I went under the knife for him. I had two facelifts to look twenty-eight forever, and none of them worked. I look worse at seventy-five than before I spent my old age savings to look young for my husband. Don't you ever marry for money."

She put her arms around him, but Girgis wrenched her wrist, twisting it so she dropped one of his girly magazines. She grabbed another from his drawer and backed further away from him, laughing, teasing, and poking fun.

Sobs convulsed Girgis's shivering body. "Your irritability," he whined. "It's the first sign of dementia."

"My husband calls me a loser. Look at you, both of you."

"You're full of the old timer's diseases in your own head."

She retreated at his words, but he followed her, unaware of the sash weight lying on top of a magazine he had taken from his open drawer. The back of Client #9's knees brushed the side of his bed.

Client #9 crouched there, cowering beside his bed, her eyes wide with fright. Drunken gibberish spilled from the twitching corners of her white-lined lips. The sounds angered him. She wiped the white foam from the corners of her mouth.

She lifted her leg toward the sash weight to high kick it from his hands, and missed. He stalked her.

"I hate the way women smell," Girgis hollered, "like rotten fish."

"You want to know how women smell, you bastard," Client #9 screeched. "Well get a load of this." She ripped off her sanitary napkin and dragged the bloody rag under his nose. "Smell what estrogen and progesterone hormone replacement therapy does to a seventy-five year-old woman. You never stop your period after menopause. Why do I have to do this routine to look young for my new husband?"

"You're crazy with elder rage," the young man shouted.

Anger fired from his brain. Girgis lunged at her like a wounded carnivore. Client #9 sidled away, and tripped, tumbling across his bed. She struggled upward, clawing at his face with razor-sharp acrylic nails.

She pushed past him, and he grabbed her by the shoulders and squeezed her head between his knee and the wall. His thigh was crushing. In the wide, fish-eye view camera lens, Girgis's face looked like a moon in black water.

I got a close-up shot of Client #9's wedding ring. Cold light clung to her arms like fireflies. No way was I going to interfere in this network news shot. No way was I going to open that door at this wee hour and announce I've been taping for public broadcast in a future court room.

Client #9's leg shot out, and Girgis kicked her at the base of the spine. "Scum," he shouted, and she flew forward. It could have happened in a public train or a bus. No one would look up in a public place nine times out of ten. I held my ground behind the video camera like the objective observer of nature. Survival of the fittest. Let nature take its course.

He yanked off her pink and orange hennaed with white hair frosted wig and rubbed her face along the white comforter so the dark eyeliner and gray shadow smeared off. "Stop trying to look like a movie star, grandma" he begged in a loud, shaky voice.

Girgis pinned her down across his bed. She slapped him hard across the cheek. Without conscious volition, I guessed, the sash weight plunged harder and harder across her skull. Girgis was unable to stop.

He dropped the sash weight on the bed. Then he fell across his stepmother's body, crying and begging forgiveness. He looked at her a long while, and soon realized she was beginning to stir. Girgis rose, and put the

pillow over her face. That's when I stopped the rolling tape, and flew into his room with a 22-caliber revolver hidden in my purse.

Girgis cringed next to the bed, unable to look at her. I walked over to the bed and removed the pillow. She groaned and began to cough. Thank goodness she survived.

Girgis ran past me into the bathroom and turned on the water so I couldn't hear him sobbing and retching loudly, but I heard him. He locked himself in the bathroom and became silent.

I dialed an ambulance and asked Client #9 to let me examine her. "Do you believe me now that he'll kill you if Client # 10 won't? Will you get out now?" I asked.

Client #9 groaned. "Do you have it all on tape? Is the evidence admissible in court? Can we get Client # 10 to give me back all my money he lost and took from me when he managed my income and the little money my first husband left me?"

"Yes. I'm here to help, but I can't understand why you required me to wait this long. I almost let him kill you to get this tape. And only because you insisted I record you this way."

"I don't care," Client #9 sobbed. "Client # 10 stole all my money. I'm broke and I can't pay you anymore as my documentarian. My grandson is a parasite living off my inheritance. I want him to get an education, a job, a wife, and his own place."

"He's not fit to marry and raise a family. He'll beat them and start the cycle all over again....just like your first husband and your second husband. He needs help...to understand that in a family, no one hits a woman, and a woman doesn't hit anyone either. Don't you think I care about the future?"

"Yes you care—about your network news broadcast as a foreign correspondent. You wanted the scoop, but I keep the rights to my life story as a film in international cinema," she insisted.

"When you start to respect yourself again, you'll call me again." I said. "I can show what makes your whole family tick in a sound bite."

"I bet you can."

I wondered what I was going to do about Girgis. What's next for him?

"I want to come with you alone to America," Client #9 demanded. "I want to live in a luxury condominium where the weather is mild in the winter among other people my own age. I don't want to be married to a man who is not slow to anger. My grandson can go live on his own or with his mother in America, but in another city from where I will be enjoying the serenity of my golden years. Why not? I speak seven languages. Now's my chance to use those words... *Inshallah*," she added. "*Khallas*," (Finished!). I've raised my

children. Now is my time for travel, fun and games. Give me my camera. I also want to be a documentarian,” said Client #9. I handed her my best video recording devices and headed home to Berkeley, where I belonged.

We all marry our mirrors, someone who reflects how we feel about ourselves at the moment. My auntie always told me that, “Every wife is a mirror of her own husband's failures, and every husband a victim of his wife's success.”

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2. Time Traveling the Ancient Mediterranean with Paul of Patmos and his Dog, Xanthe

The Antikythera Device: The Day St. Paul of Patmos Taught Me to Pray for the Gift of Being Able to Trust in a Power Higher Than Human Who Doesn't Think of Me as a Snack

More than two-thousand years ago my present mitochondrial DNA inhabited a woman named Calliope of Patmos, whose family invented, owned, and gave up to the sea, one of the rare, Greek Antikythera celestial navigation gears used for nearly three thousand years by Greek and later, Roman sailors. The antikythera device served as a mechanism of complicated gears physically representing the Callippic and Saros astronomical cycles.

It's not only gears I wanted to mesh. So let me take you back there again for a few hours to peruse the human condition. Some of my distant Greek family members still carry the ancient Greek name of Photiades. For clarity Photia, could mean "source of light" as in "light an oil lamp and walk out of the darkness," or the enlightened' one. Intimate glimpses of the human condition may be found in numerous art galleries.

In the many incarnations of my ancient DNA, the molecules lived in many bodies of generations well before the "common era" on the small Greek island of Patmos, , surrounded by the Aegean Sea at the time white-haired Paul of Tarsus once sought a bowl of broth at my family tavern of sustenance serving food for the sensibilities.

My beliefs there on Patmos emphasized good deeds rather than complex creeds. I had been a builder of dreams seeking practical applications, but so far ahead of my century, that I actually found time-travel a gift of destiny.

For me back then, the daughter of a proper Greek widow who could write well. My mother copied numerous scrolls and letters that Paul of Tarsus on Patmos brought into the tavern. As a follower, mother would give me copies of some letters. My windowed mother, Xanthe committed herself to faith, keeping the family together in spite of all odds, and putting bread on the table.

Here on Patmos, the family goal focused solely on commitment. We all followed Paul's when he came near our tavern for his bowl of broth and a listened to the whisperings of his talks and writings. And yet I longed to be an explorer and observer of comparative thought in faraway places and future times.

As girl of sixteen alone in the world, and having arrived as the new tutor in a wealthy Roman household villa in the far west Neapolis, the only way I could study the human condition consisted of gawking at works of art where I could reflect. I kept a treasure hidden with me the prized antikythera navigation gears.

For it is written: Five hundred years before that time of Paul, my father's father-fourteen generations removed, invented the antikythera celestial navigation device, and in those years, it served well as my treasure.

Not only had I been granted Roman citizenship because of the treasured Greek family name appearing in writing in three languages as the celestial navigation gear's inventor, but now, on my first job as Greek language, poetry writing, and history tutor to a child in the wealthiest Roman family in Neapolis, where many people also spoke Greek.

The older child had a separate mathematics tutor, and a tutor for engineering and building bridges. But I was assigned to teach the five-year old to read, speak, and write poetry as a healing tool in Greek.

So begins my proper passage at sixteen from adolescence to womanhood as a tutor in ancient Rome, the last outpost of civilization to my senses. See any similarity in this holistic adventure to a timeless search for the perfect nurturing mother?

Look at your deeds, I heard my mother once say to Paul of Tarsus when he lived and wrote on Patmos, the island of my birth. I told Paul that our art shows us the human condition. And peace in the home feeds the growth of

consciousness. Now, I found myself in Rome, hidden in villa gardens so far from my family. Yet my letters to Paul were still sent as often as my letters to my own mother whose life focused on commitment to family and faith.

Often, I wore that plain iron ring and carried the scrolls that set me apart from the denizens of slaves who also served as tutors. Because of my citizen-ring and the signed papers, none of my father had ever been slaves of the Romans.

Look at me at sixteen, a Roman citizen with signed deeds to my antikythera invention attributed to my family and me as the only heir.

Yet as a proper Greek girl, and not a slave, invitations abounded to dine as the daughter of the long missing-at-sea Apollodorus. There were no more men left in my family to work as well-paid Greek architects contracted to draft the plans for villas in Neapolis for the wealthiest aristocrats as there had been for generations. I passed the precious time writing letters to Paul of Tarsus on Patmos as he wrote letters of his own that one day I would read.

And I, never really alone at sixteen with my mother's copies of Paul's letters nearby, spent a few nights on special feast days at the house of Saloni, a wealthy Roman and distant relative of the prosperous Cornelius family. His vast fortunes came from building many summer villas for still wealthier Romans in Neapolis overlooking the sea. Saloni, with wife and children shared this large villa.

At those times of my first few days on trial for employment as a tutor to my five-year-old playmate, Octavia, I lied awake, well protected, I thought, close to Octavia and to her rotund mother, Velia, an Etruscan who married into the old Latium family of Saloni Cornelius. As chaperoned children, we slept in the roped, rutted wool and feathered torus next to Velia.

"What's that you're holding?" Velia asked me.

"My Antikythera device," I said timorously. "It's a navigational tool for Greek sailors."

"Give me that!" Velia quickly removed it from my tiny fingers and pocketed the device.

"But it belongs to my father. It's been in our family for four hundred years." I quickly grabbed it back from her hands and placed it inside my goatskin purse.

"Well, now it's mine. Give it here." Pursy Velia huffed, pulling the gears from the sack strung around my waist.

"Go ahead keep it then," I sighed. "If you don't know how to use it right, there's the danger that any ship that misuses it might sink. I must not lose this. It's all that stands between my freedom and slavery. My Roman citizenship scrolls would be worthless without proof that my family line invented the device."

"Then I'll sell it so you won't envy this evil eye in front of me," Velia teased. I used my own family members as models by memorizing the fruits of our family slogan of deeds, not creeds. I jostled the words to Velia without understanding their impact.

"Our Greek family travels only to study and understand the human condition for inner peace. And you can only learn about the human condition by studying what is in the art galleries of all peoples. Our goal is peace in the home.

You have to practice it in every room if you ever want to grow world peace. That's why you must return the antikythera to me or my mother or our friend, Paul of Tarsus who is now living on Patmos. The gears point the celestial direction of navigation. It belongs on a ship. Our family invented it for the purpose of growing peace."

"You grow peace, like a vine or a tree?" Velia looked up in surprise, grinning crookedly, but not smiling with her eyes.

"That's right," I told her eagerly. "You heal yourself into peace in an art gallery, not in a pantheon. Otherwise you're talking to yourself. Don't you know that the purpose of life is to understand the human condition?"

"You certainly can't do anything about it." Velia squealed with impatience. "You're just a crupper, a strap holding a riding saddle steady," Velia said impatiently. "I've heard about Paul of Tarsus. And I know all about your poor, widowed mother. You know what you are? You're trying to steady yourself on what Paul has taught you. I heard him speak on Patmos."

"So you know his followers."

"I've heard more than you understand about the oral traditions," Velia smirked as she retraced the sign of the fish by dipping her ring finger into a goblet of wine and tracing the x-tailed fish on the shiny edge of a platter of black figs."

"You're only a sixteen-year old girl a very wealthy and smart girl for a foreigner," Velia continued. "Luckily, you are not the slave of our oldest son's tutor. He's from Attica. Maybe you can fix some of the broken furniture around this house. What's more of a human condition than that torus I sleep on arriving back from repair full of vermin?"

"My friend, Paul of Tarsus told me and my mother ten years ago that the purpose of life is to take care of one another. That's why Paul of Patmos gave me his little dog, Xanthe as a present when I sailed west."

"So that's how you repair what's broken," Velia laughed, admonishing me. "You take care of that filthy wolf cub. Romans prefer cats in the kitchen, not predators. Keep that dangerous wolf-dog in the atrium."

"My half dog half wolf puppy will guard me well. I'll put her in the garden house for now, but she is loyal and bonded to me. Look how beautiful her brushed fur is, like the silver rays of the moon."

"That's a lot of strange information about *she* wolves and dogs from a Greek young woman. Learning architecture might not be a useless plan after all for a Greek woman nowadays. Times are changing for women here in Neapolis. Women have more freedom here than in Rome. Have you heard about the new changes in property inheritance laws for women? Probably not! bet all you can teach my five-year old daughter is the purpose of life. Well, what is the purpose of life? I suppose all you can do is spout ideas that can't be applied to real work around my house."

"My own tutors from Alexandria told me the purpose of life is to repair. But I wished Paul would have been my tutor."

"Paul is busy with more important things than being your tutor. So what did your tutors from Alexandria teach you about repairing the stench of life? My solution is to give the world our most practical Roman giftflush toilets and underground pipes for warm baths."

"We had flush toilets and pipes underground to warm water before you did."

"Why don't you repair your own world with those healing unguents or spices your tutor brought you from Alexandria? I know you have brought them to Neapolis with you. What's in that sack?"

I opened the bags with the air holes first. This first day with my new employer as a tutor began to feel as grey, tense, and tedious. "Watch how the she wolf dog stretches her body in a dance."

Paul's gift of Xanthe, the wolf-dog puppy that I pulled from a perforated goatskin pack leaped from my hands, scattering across the mosaic floor. "Your five-year old daughter, Octavia will find that puppy is a good listener. The wolf dog is nearly twelve weeks old and is tame because Paul and I have cuddled and nourished the animal since she was five days old. Even her wolf mother was tamed. And this dog's father is a Roman army Mastiff that served well on ships with the centurions."

I watched the slaves overstuff Velia's torus with swans down. They placed it upon the lectus so it would be high enough from the flagstones to be free from vermin and covered it with goat hide.

Velia had coarse, yellowed linens that scratched my arms and made me itch, and her bleached wool coverings reeked of the urine used to bleach it. The stench of sweat, roses, and myrrh still couldn't mask the bleaching with stale urine, no matter how many times the slaves beat the fabric underwater. Even when dried in the sun, the damp coverings smelled rancid. Fresh air couldn't erase what secrets those covers witnessed.

I watched in Saloni's villa as the carpenters made the first woodcut on the sofa and applied its moldings to match the room. Above, the ceiling murals of clouds on faded blue-green skies lulled me to sleep. I had my sixteenth birthday the day Octavia had her fifth, and we celebrated so that I was invited to sleep in the house of Saloni-Cornelius, chaperoned by Velia so that little Octavia, skinny me, and rotund Velia all shared and slept upon the same, soft torus on this enormous lectus full of wormholes. Velia even allowed Octavia to hold the kitten in the folds of her tunic.

Saloni, in the next bedroom slept with his 20-year old son in two separate lectus and torus far apart at opposite ends of the room. In the darkest hours

of the early morning pouring rain chilled the room yet soothed the scraping of the crickets like nails on dry pumice stone and the erudite screams of the night.

"Remember when we played *Suffering*? And I'd rub your belly, and your doll would be delivered like a baby?" Velia laughed and whooped her perpetual hacking cough from years of inhaling the dust of granite in her father's sculpture and stone mason industry. I rolled over, pulling my short dark hair from my eyes. Next to me five-year old Octavia soundly slept.

My mouth and nose felt paper-thin and raw as I trembled against the roar of thunder and the wintry rain pounding the roof tiles. Saloni^us tiptoed out of his sleeping chamber and crawled into bed with his wife. "What are you doing here?" I provoked him.

Saloni^us shed his tunic at the foot of the too-soft torus and climbed under the covers to have coitus with his wife. I knew about those acts at ten from enough spying through billowy curtains on Saloni^us's older son and one of the kitchen slaves.

Octavia woke with a start, rubbing her eyes. "Get out!" She raged in her five-year old, screeching voice. "Are you kicking me out?" Saloni^us stared at Octavia. His dark eyes bulged with unbridled anger.

"Look what you did," "frightened, beaten-down Velia interrupted with a whine. "You woke dragon dumpling."

"Shut up, you Etruscan whore."

"Don't call my little girl a whore."

"Better you should be crippled. You should have been born a boy. I'll kill you, you red-haired piece of garbage."

Saloni^us hurried his tunic back on and stormed out looking for something to smash. He found a hammer in the living room and began to smash Octavia's musical instrumentsfirst her turtle lyre. Octavia's birthday and mine today! had almost forgotten.

Velia had saved a few sesterces from the pittance she told me that Saloni^us gave her each morning and bought Octavia two stringed musical instruments for her fifth birthday. I hadn't been home to look at the presents my loving

father bought me, but that surprise could wait. I spent the night after Octavia's birthday party simply because Cornelius was close friends with his most important scribe, Salonijs, and my father had work to discuss with Cornelius. We all spent the night in the house of Salonijs.

And now rage overtook Salonijs as if possessed by an angry bull. "We Romans don't worship animals, nor do we let them pollute our households. Once in a while our Egyptian slaves let their kittens ransack the kitchens to scare off rats and buzzing insects."

Yet the look on Salonijs's face was that of a mad, starved animal charging his prey. Normally he was a charming man to Cornelius, or in public, but at home, I've seen him change in an instant before the eyes of his wife and children. And an hour later, he denied anything was amiss.

When Salonijs finished smashing the smaller turtle lyres, he went for Octavia's wooden kithera with its special echoing sound box, and then for her larger, barbitos lyres. These were presents my father brought Octavia for her birthday. Then Salonijs shouted in pain as he kicked his bare foot through the thick and solid arms of the eleven-stringed phorminx lyre and the array of extra sheep-gut strings that Velia purchased for her older son's seventh birthday.

After a year or two of lessons, he gave it up. For years it had stood among her son's undusted toys, forgotten, until Velia asked me if I wanted it and told me the story of how Hermes invented the lyre and how many years it remained in her family.

I did want it at first, until I realized that Octavia wanted it more. So I made sure it stayed with Velia's family. I told my father not to bring it to our house, even if Velia offered it to us once more.

Salonijs put his foot through the paintings and other instruments brought for Octavia's birthday. Finally, he grabbed the Egyptian kitchen slave's striped kitten that lost its way and wandered into Velia's room and held its belly against the hot pipes being installed in the new indoor bathhouse, until it stopped meowing.

I looked in on Octavia's mother, but Velia didn't move or respond to my presence. She laid there, one arm over the sobbing Octavia crouching against her mother. Velia gazed unblinking at the ceiling, and Octavia had told me many times that her mother said she had given up all effort.

I would never give up trying to find a life, an identity, a self, or a sense of belonging. I ran into the peristyle and Octavia jumped up and followed me, clinging to me for protection, a protection Velia didn't try to give to Octavia or to me as a guest in Saloni's home.

"Not my birthday presents. Don't smash my presents." Octavia cried, but now Saloni had spent his rage and returned, exhausted to his own room, but the respite didn't last for long.

The louder the sounds of her voice grew, the more angry Saloni became. He began to chase Octavia first and then both of us all over his house waving this fasces a set of rods bound in the form of a bundle which contained an axe. Saloni's cousin, the bodyguard of a magistrate, carried the fasces.

He must have left it with Saloni for safekeeping when he went to visit his son's new baby in the countryside. Now he separated the axe from the rods and swung the axe over his head like a madman.

"If I catch you, I'll cripple you." Heads will roll before you'll become a tramp." He went for the axe in his private closet, putting the hammer away. Octavia and I scampered under a table and crouched there, sobbing. I didn't know how to defend myself or protect Octavia, being a scrawny boy scared beyond uttering a sound. Saloni seemed like a raging giant, a belching volcano spewing his poisonous gases at me and waving an axe.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry, daddy," Octavia cried.

"Better you should be crippled than to be born a girl and make trouble for me. I should have flushed her out into the Tiber. Better she wasn't made or born," Saloni ranted.

I sneaked back into Velia's sleeping quarters dragging Octavia by the hand. And we saw that Octavia's mother began to stir and shout to Saloni who still hunted us down from the next room.

"If I have to get up you two fighting make me sicker." She began to cough again. "Leave my baby alone." I shoved Octavia under the lectus and sidled under it myself. As children, even I at sixteen and she at five could crouch there, but a giant like Saloni would never be able to squeeze in that space.

Salonius, now angrier with Velia, took a swing at Octavia and me with the hammer, and missed because we moved deeper into the dark under the lectus. Salonius ran out of the room to retrieve his axe and in the instant of time I had to flee, Octavia and I darted from the kitchen and dashed out of the atrium into the garden.

There was a deep hole dug for an outdoor as well as an indoor privy and also a partially built storage room under construction. The workers had left for the night, and the hole in the garden soil was deep enough with enough dirt to cover us.

In the darkness, Salonius chased his daughter and me, gaining on me as I disappeared into the hole in the garden. We squeezed our small bodies into a partially filled dung pit, hiding inside back of an old barrel left there as it was still too new and unfinished to be used by anyone.

We covered ourselves with garden soil. I had a small space for air there in the barrel, and there was enough sawed out of it for me to see the lamp Salonius held high as he looked around for a few seconds, wild-eyed, wiping the beaded sweat on his upper lip on his forearm. "If I catch you, I'll kill you," he shouted in a tremulous tone. I brought my puppy, Xanthe with me and held her snugly. She protected me, and I protected her and brought nourishment to the 12-week old *canis-lupus*. This animal friend given to me by Paul of Patmos must be protected from other beasts.

From between the wide slats of the broken barrel, I watched as he swung his axe overhead. As he passed a work table, Salonius slapped the ax against his thigh a couple of times. Then he sighed and left it on the table. Finally, exhausted, he plodded back into the atrium. I petted the puppy and covered her with my stola. We kept silent, and the silence tangled us together with one fate like a fisherman's net as the full moon watched over us.

The next afternoon, Salonius denied anything happened out of the ordinary the night before at least in front of my father, his architect and physician friends, and the construction workers in Salonius's garden. In fact my father had paid for the new addition as Cornelius was noted for his thriftiness and Salonius for his dutiful long hours as Cornelius's scribe.

I had to stay another day while my father finalized business ledgers with poorly paid Salonius, Cornelius and the architects. Salonius kept grumbling

about me eating him out of house and home as I sat eating some cheese and figs from the kitchen slave's hands.

I watched Salonius stalk into the kitchen pawing after the Egyptian slave girl who kept looking for her missing kitten. I told her what I saw Salonius do to the kitten as I sneaked after him trying to hide in the room where the pipes heated the new pool. Suddenly, Velia, in her best shrill, let him have her words as if they were daggers.

"No sooner did I put the baby on your lap then you told me to take her off because she gave you a stiff ache between your thighs."

"You keep hounding me just because your step father came into your room to ask you whether or not you wanted to copulate with him when you went to visit your mother."

"I told him don't even think of it and ordered him to get out. He's your rich brother and insisted I couldn't tell him what room to go to in his own house."
"You could have told your mother."

"I didn't want to upset her. She had enough meeting me for the first time as a grown woman after giving me away to my father and step mother when I was two."

"What was wrong with you that your own mother kept the boys and gave away the only girl? When she married for the second time, she kept the girl she had then and gave her all the inheritance, didn't she?"

"Yes. She said because I made her look old."

"Why did your father divorce your mother?"

"He wanted to marry that Thracian redhead."

"So why didn't you kick your stepfather out of your room?"

"I did. I insisted he get out. Then I told him I expected to be treated as a guest while visiting my own mother. Don't you understand or believe me?"

Velia pleaded. "I threw him out, but you don't see him grabbing an axe or a hammer and chasing innocent children, scaring them for life. Would you want your daughter to marry a man exactly like you?"

"Girls only make trouble. You know how many times I asked the that Delphi hag who delivered you to check to make sure maybe she made a mistake maybe Octavia was a boy?"

"Is that why you never held a conversation with your daughter or even smiled at her? Why do you distance yourself from your daughter? Not once in your whole life did you ever talk to the girl or show her that she's more than human garbage in your eyes."

"What about you going into your grown son's room to massage his feet every morning and comb the lice out of his hair?"

"I'm a mother."

"He's twenty, and he tells me you're overbearing, you Etruscan harlot."

"I married you as a virgin. Don't you ever brand me with that word!"

"There was no blood."

"My skin stretches. I'm going back to bed."

"You have an answer for everything. I've run out of words, something I'll never do as Cornelius's scribe, but for speaking, you have to have the last word, just like a woman. And one of these days, you'll pay for that run-on mouth of yours with your life. Heads will roll. Where is Octavia?"

"In the garden again."

"Let her rot down there. Lower your voice. We have guests."

Salonius didn't even notice I sat at the back of the kitchen in a corner eating my figs and cheese, watching him, following him as he staggered back to bed. Velia spent the rest of the day at her distaff spinning wool and following the slaves around, envying them. My bodyguard finished his business with Salonius.

By the next day the litter arrived for me to leave, and I felt a droopy feeling at letting Octavia go back to that ambience while I returned to Patmos, utterly rejected as the new language tutor. My bodyguard soon revealed that Velia had hired a boy with dreams of studying architecture.

If only I could take my little friend with me. I wanted to leave so much, and yet, reluctantly, I sat one more afternoon alone and watched tiny Octavia, much too young for me to play with as a friend.

I turned to bid farewell to wealthy Velia who wore the same stained and disheveled dark stola she wore the day before. But it covered her shortness and rotundity, her flapping ham-hock upper arms and her enormous la banza belly. Velia had revealed Octavia's older brother by fourteen years had a short temper like his father's.

"My older son had a fight with me over you and Octavia making too much noise," Velia said.

"Me?" I shouted. "I didn't do anything to spoil Octavia's fifth birthday party."

"If you think Salonus shouted and smashed all of Octavia's birthday presents fine musical lyres, some of them gifts from your father, my oldest son broke an amphora over my arm. I dared him to do it. Octavia saw everything. She crouched under the table to hide. She was whining, complaining for her brother to show her how to play trigon with the boys. He told her to go away, and she cried."

"Does Salonus know your son broke an amphora over your arm?"

"I had to tell him. So now he smashed Octavia's brother's learning tools and tore up his scrolls he needed to study to become an advocate."

"I'm too tired to begin my travel back to Patmos today." I shuffled into the atrium passing the dead bird in the green cage. Velia and Octavia followed me.

"It caught too much heat." You'll have to take it down to the garden, make a pyre and burn it. Octavia is too young to light fires, and the kitchen slaves have their hands busy with food."

I ran, sobbing, into the bedroom. "Listen, you little mouse. Want to take Octavia to see the Neapolis market before you go back to Patmos? I'll be with your retinue today." Velia took a plate of pickled eggs from the kitchen slave and offered me a heel of bread.

Businesses opened their shutters. Bankers seemed to pose like gossiping statues on the steps of the temples. Beggars hid in the recesses and shadows in back of the doors of open shops.

I wondered what all the trade gossip meant and realized that only accomplishments, benefits, and advantages were pondered. At the end of

the day, everyone would probably do the same thing as the sun drowned. At least the fragrant jasmine of Neapolis masked the pungent garum fish sauce stench of Rome's sweltering rooms in the heat of summer.

Velia, Octavia, and I walked through the dusty shops looking at the baubles and silken wisps of cloth, the sweet, sickly stench of distinctive odors, spices, incense, and unguents. On her way I watched Octavia watch her mother, Velia steal from the vendors and shops lapis broaches, Scythian wolf earrings, a white stola so small it could never fit her rotundity, and tunics already woven and sewn for babies. When no one looked, she'd stuff clothing under her stola.

"I don't want any of the beads or perfume," Octavia whispered from the communal public privy. "They're cursed. You'll get bad luck."

Velia banged the shutter of each bakery we passed. "Your wealthy father only gives me grain for bread and a few lentils. How else can I live? He rewards the kitchen slaves with more than he's ever given me for spending. Can't you see he's in charge of who selects all the food in this house? I get a few asses for spending, but not enough even for a moldy dried fig."

I passed no judgment. Instead, I blurted out, "I'll pay for everything. Eat what you wish. I must repay you for inviting me to Octavia's birthday feast. Why don't you come back to Patmos with me and follow Paul of Tarsus while he is there? My mother can raise the funds needed to keep him in food and shelter while he writes and speaks to all who listen on Patmos." My body blocked the view of the litter.

"I don't want to wear that evil bracelet," Octavia cried. Velia, the Etruscan, would lay that green-eyed curse on Octavia when she misbehaved, at least in my presence, and then Octavia would punish me by having an accident. It seemed the tiny girl had lifted herself up so she could fall as a release of the tension and terror.

Laying the fear on Octavia with Velia's palms caused the fear, Octavia told me that day, and later Octavia sought relief by getting hurt, getting the accident over with. Only the curse, the evil eye stood forth, and the punishment the child inflicted on herself fired from deep within her like a cold well of truth.

"Here, stuff this stola in the belt of your tunic and put this outer tunic over it."

"No! I won't."

Here in the market place, cheap tunics fluttered in the breeze in the midst of a sunlit square. Velia dragged whining me into a dimly lit shop. The old couple who ran the shop brought out some fabric remnants, and when their backs turned for a moment, the longer of the remnant ended up inside Velia's stola. She waddled into the street to see the shoemaker. Velia and daughter sat down on a cushion before the shoemaker's shop.

"Give me that skinny foot," said the shopkeeper, trying to shove one of the new little sandals on Octavia's dirt-caked foot.

"The soles are too thin," Velia complained.

"Leave me alone!" Octavia whined, storming out of the shoe section. Octavia shouted a horrible obscenity at the shopkeeper, the same word I heard her father call her last night as I looked over my shoulder at the shopkeeper's expression.

"That filthy rat," he stammered.

Breathless Velia caught up to her daughter in front of the public cistern where a line of slaves and poor citizens, all women, waited their turn to bring water into the small rooms they occupied around the market district called the Subura.

"Please, Velia, as an Etruscan, come back with me to Patmos where as a foreigner you'll be freer than you are here."

"I can't give up the villa."

The Subura, a place to shop here in Neapolis, is just like the same-named Subura in Rome. Both became a stench of dried blood, moldy fruit, rotting meat, sweat, urine, and manure. In Rome when I was ten, our family took me to see it. To find the Subura in Rome, you enter the valley between the southern end of the Viminal and the western end of the Esquiline, or Oppius. Rome's Subura is connected with the forum by the Argiletum. It continues eastward between the Oppius and the Cispius by the Clivus Suburanus, ending at the Porta Esquilina. This Subura had the same look.

Now our litter ended up in the bakery district where we paused to find some shade. Velia chastised Octavia with a pointed finger. "Horse face, why by Jupiter did you say that?"

"He didn't have to call me skinny like in ugly," Octavia insisted, standing up for her reason for shouting an obscenity at the shoemaker. Velia threw her hands in the air out of frustration, or maybe she wanted to give up at that moment.

"Why did you have to wear that torn article of clothing outside the house? You're beginning to stink just like your father who's never taken a bath in years even with three pools.

The old stinker washes the bottom of his feet, his face and hands so Cornelius will think he's clean. He's afraid of water, says it makes his legs itch."

I listened in silence, then blurted. "Why doesn't he rub some oil on his skin if water makes it itch?"

Velia shook her head. While I observed but did not participate, she spent the day teaching Octavia how to steal clothing none of us needed from poor, old merchants who were overwhelmed with business or had no customers at all.

These merchants were too poor to own a slave to help them in their little shops, and most had sons who were killed in the wars. I felt sorry for them, but Velia only wanted this sensation she must have received from taking anything that didn't belong to her, and mostly nothing her size or Octavia's that she could use at home.

Everything anyone can buy from a shop could be found here. My eyes feasted on the sweets from the shops, but I had no coins with me.

I knew at any time my father left me a bag of coins I could have my bodyguards arrange for a litter and slaves to do the shopping for me. I knew Cornelius was a miser, as my father always joked, but I never realized that his wife had to stoop to stealing to get a thrill or a variety of raisin cake, or a bolt of fabric to sew Octavia her basic clothing.

"Where's your father, where's the bastard?" Velia whispered to Octavia.

"Probably doing scribe work for Cornelius. Or maybe Cornelius treated him to one of his flower shows."

"How brilliant of you to use grown-up words, Octavia," I said. Velia had to get her words in. "Some men go straight home after work. Saloni^us, he has his flower shows. Did you know he caught a brothel disease when Octavia's brother was five?"

"What's a brothel disease?" I asked Velia.

"Caught it from a Cappadocian harlot, he confessed to his Egyptian kitchen slave. I overheard them. He told me it came back from his soldiering days. He thinks I have my mother's head."

"See this scar on my face?" Octavia grimaced.

"So?" I said. "It's ugly. Now no man will want to marry you with that wide, red scar on your face."

"That's because you cursed me last year." Octavia cried as she looked up at Velia's frowning face. "Did you think your curse would give me this?"

"Where by Hercules is your father? He's never home, the bastard."

Tears ran down Octavia's sallow cheeks. "I told you that stuff you steal brings me the evil eye."

"Shut up! The market's crowded with gossip. You'll be overhead, and it will get back to Saloni^us or Corneli^us."

"Everybody calls me crazy," Octavia sobbed, taking great gasps of air.

"When I grow up nobody nice will marry me."

"Just ask anyone you want to marry," I teased. "If you wait for someone to ask, no one will. Ha, ha. But you'd better have a lot of money to bribe them." Perhaps I teased Octavia too much that day when she was five. It stopped when I returned to Patmos, and we saw little of each other.

I sighed and pulled out her drawing tablet and stylus from the litter. She began to draw a grotesque face with pointy fingers on her small art tablet. Poor Octavia Her entire world found solace in music and art, painting, playing the lyre, and sculpting. Now I watched the face she drew with her childish, but skilled fingers. The face was contorted with gaping mouth and reptilian. "What kind of happy face is that?"

"I don't know. But it makes me happy to do it."

Velia watched her daughter draw as she whispered to me. "Last week my oldest son took Octavia on a trip. She told me that as they strolled together on a path, her brother stopped at the highest point on the bridge to gaze at the view. Suddenly my son gave his sister a shove and then pulled her back to safety before she could let out a wail. But the five-year old heard the whisper.

"That's right," Octavia squealed. "He has no right to scare me like that." Velia scratched her head. "He denied it just like his father denies doing cruel acts. He started to sing to her. Then he lifted and dangled her as if to throw Octavia in the Tiber. She told me that she lashed out, flailing, screaming in terror. A passerby saw them horsing around, and she said he put her down harshly."

"I asked him why he did that," Octavia said, tossing her curls back like a rag doll. "And he said it was because I was his baby sister."

I vowed to find a way to help Octavia to a better life without adding more problems.

I felt the responsibility to help Velia and Octavia in any way I could. "I will talk to Paul when I get back to Patmos."

This became a heavy burden for my widowed, aging mother back in Patmos. But I would do my best as a family friend for this family that had rejected me as tutor because I happened to be a sixteen-year old woman seeking a man who would be slow to anger. And what they wanted focused on a boy that could inherit my family's generations of engineers, navigation inventors, and architects.

Kindness and peace in the home brings out a healthy glow and sweetness in any woman wherever she may be present. In a way, I felt responsible to do a good deed for Octavia and her mother. I feel now at a loss that Velia succumbed, eaten by her resentment, and Octavia quickly had been signed away by Saloni, now years later, honored by miserly Cornelius's insistence of having Octavia's hand in marriage.

Some cannot help themselves. I thought about the striped silvery kitten. Nearly ten years had passed, and today I gazed fondly at the spitfire bride, Octavia, forged in the fires of her father's perpetual pool of anger, her mother's weak, hacking cough, persistent complaints of resentment, and growing frailty.

I'm back on Patmos with my friendly wolf-dog, far from Rome or Neapolis. I'm reading copies of Paul's letters, and he still savors the broth in my mother's sweet tavern and cares to gently pet the tavern's official greeter, our *canis-lupus*, protector of commitment to family, faith, and friends. With a dog in the home, there is harmony.

When in Rome, trust the volcano nearby as a better protector of Greek women than a slave rebellion on the loose. But here in Patmos, we sit in a circle and listen to Paul of Tarsus and those who follow.

In this village we are welcome to freely question, seek answers, and think for ourselves. Our symbols, like our gears, are our *antikythera* (from the Greek island of Antikythera long before we arrived on Patmos). They stand for exploration by celestial navigation. Our destiny is beyond the stars.

#

3. Commitment

965 of the Common Era, Kiev

"Deliver these Torah Scrolls by Rosh Hashanah," the rabbi eagerly committed. "You must ride from Kiev to Jerusalem on the back of an ass. Do you commit your values to this purpose in the name of the lost tribe of Simeon?"

"Surely, only an ass would attempt to ride to Jerusalem in these timorous times," laughed Bihar of Balanjar, a great horseman of the steppes who now dwelled in Kiev. "But being a man of a thousand disguises, I will take to those roads in the ways that I trade along my Silk Road, as a healer of men and a repairer of the world. And I promise that by Rosh Hashanah, the Torah Scrolls will be in the hands of the great rabbi from Toledo whom I am to meet at Jerusalem and deliver the scrolls."

"By Rosh Hashanah, you promise?" The rabbi arched one eyebrow feverishly.

"Yes By the sweetness of Rosh Hashanah By the harvest For the sake of a new year and the chance to be at one with commitment to what repairs the world."

Bihar of Balanjar, a great healer who used acupuncture needles acquired on the Silk Road from a wise one of Cathay, Bihar, the great grandson of a former Tengri shaman, accepted his son's rites of passage into Judaism on the same day that the Rus Prince, Svyatoslav conquered the Khazar white fortress at Sarkel.

The people scattered in the midst of a war that continued to escalate. Khazari widows whose husbands had died in the war accepted the little pillows to catch their tears. Bihar's soldiers carried into battle the Khazar Kagan's standard as a round, polished silver mirror on a long pole, hung with variously colored horsetails and other ornaments.

Bihar, now all dressed up as a Khazarian Kagan with no place to go, raised his skullcap over his wife's oil lamps and stared through his tattered hat. His voice had a cold, slick quiver of peace. He turned to the wise rabbi who traveled all the way from Persia. Bihar's voice grew louder. "Baruch Atah Adonai Eloheinu Melech ha'olam oseh ma'aseh vereshit." We praise You, Eternal God, Sovereign of the universe, Source of creation and its wonders.

"None beneath the Kagan of the Khazars and his fine horses can take this Torah to Jerusalem," decreed the Persian rabbi, opening the ark to show Bihar sacred scrolls safely hidden in the walls above a chest of frayed skullcaps. "Yet I don't think you're going to Jerusalem in a straight line as you are. If I know you, you'll find your way to Jerusalem in the garb of what, this time, my Kagan of a thousand disguises?"

Inside the shattered white fortress of the Khazars at Sarkel, by the Don River, the Kagan, Bihar began to daven to and fro, praying as the Persian rabbi guided a pointer at the letters Bihar long before had copied into his own language.

The Rus princes entered and asked Bihar, Kagan of the Khazari who he was now and where he wanted to go. A multilingual Kievan cousin of the Rus prince gave Bihar the triple circled hand sign, addressing him in his Turkic dialect as the Khaz Khan.

He returned Bihar's brother's shield with the large Magen David six-pointed star. The Rus soldiers took Bihar outside and let him go. Each time he was stopped, someone would say, "Let the Khazari king do what he wants."

He carried babies, newly born and laid back into his arms, dead. One with ice-blond hair, but with glassy gray eyes and a small cut on the belly. Bihar kissed him and found a soldier to help him lay the baby on a bench.

Three minutes later, his five-year old brother, already stiffened, came to join him. The coppery smell of blood ripped through the forest. Bihar had opened a door to the brick fortress at Sarkel along the Don River that its Byzantine Greek chief engineer, Petronas Kamateros, had built a century before when summoned by Bihar's great grandfather. Now Bihar drew back in familiar horror: a mountain of corpses lying amid the ruins. He closed the shattered door, and waited.

Sarkel and Atil had fallen to Rus Prince Svyatoslav, and Bihar now found himself slamming the same words into people who passed by: He shouted to the Khatun (Queen), "The babies as well, wanted war?" She turned to a Kievan Rus soldier who shrugged. The soldiers had gone without sleep eight nights in order to destroy the Khazari fortress at Sarkel. Their ships came by sea in the night.

The chain-mail swathed Khazar horsemen in pointy helmets had settled the steppes by then and had great orchards, but the sea? To a Khazar, who boasts finer horsemanship than anyone, riding alongside the horse upside down, and invisible to weapons, it was not to their advantage to be attacked by sea.

Music of the nyes, harps, and kanouns in the Persian style of taksim wafted in quarter tones from the children's room where the families of the rabbinical scholars from Persia and Baghdad came to teach the difference between torah and tumah. No war could stop the harps.

Horizontal rain lashed Bihar's face like a thousand thongs. The quiet village was carpeted with cloud-whipped birch trees. Farmers scythed their crop and burnt it, turning the air a teal blue. Judaized by rabbis from Constantinople, Khazar soldiers that fled along the Don River valley and beyond to the Silk Road were humane and decent.

One of them even came back in the battle to lead the collapsing bier bearers who had joined those of two Byzantine Fathers of the monastery hospice. The soldiers had a sorrowful expression.

"Come on, for Hashem's sake, there are seriously injured people here," Bihar cried.

The Khazar soldiers guided Bihar, at the risk of his life, as the war with Rus Prince Svyatoslav was at its peak. A Byzantine merchant, traders from Khwarizm (Azerbaijan and parts of northwest Uzbekistan), Volga Bulgaria, and Persia had perished. Their inn was crushed by the prince's catapult, and in three vaulted rooms laid a dozen traveling merchants-wounded, burnt, their stomachs open, and their arms torn away.

Bihar and some Khazar soldiers, the two Byzantine Fathers, and the Khatun all joined in, but they were not enough to carry the wounded across the alleys. The remains of a fortress had attracted Prince Svyatoslav's warriors.

Three visiting families bringing a new Torah scroll from Baghdad to Sarkel were wounded. A woman's arm had to be amputated and cauterized. All their faces were riddled with black-holed burns. They said nothing, not even a moan. But they kept their large eyes wide and thought of the place where the Volga flows into the Caspian (Sea of Meotis), the Sea of the Khazari.

The Turkic and Circassian allies of the Khazars came from the Caucasus Mountains like soft dragons face to face with the Rus silver bears sailing down the Don to many Black Sea ports.

The place of wooden synagogues, the Jewish quarter, stretched like a tough, earth-toned skin of stones. The prince's warriors struck the holy places, the ruins, while the children of Khazars, fought, davened (divined/prayed) to and fro in prayer, and scattered in the streets.

A reflection of Bihar's face in the polished silver mirror of his standard revealed a tall, muscular young man with the honey-colored complexion of one who spent his days riding in the sun. His short-clipped hair was curly and dark as an Egyptian in front, yet long in the back, where a thick braid flowed from beneath his helmet over his right shoulder and was tied at the end by three bands of malachite beads.

Bihar's lips were pulled over his teeth, giving him a look of confusion. He staggered in the distance to a ruined Byzantine monastery. "Am I in the right place?" Bihar's voice was tense as he walked up to visiting Byzantine and Armenian priests standing far enough from their ruined church.

"Courage is not in the young people," the Father responded.

"Go out and pick up the wounded," the priest called to two young men.

"You're having a hard time getting people to do that," Bihar reassured him. Serakh, a woman from Baghdad, who had just given birth, sat on the stairs with the baby in her lap, still attached to the cord. Bihar remembered her. He had bought ewes from her when she arrived in Khazaria before the prince waged his war. Her husband copied scrolls and bound special books for the children.

"Please take me back home," she begged Bihar.

"You have no home now," Bihar scowled over his shoulder in a voice dark as lava.

"But where shall I go?" She cried.

"Over there." He pointed northwest to the grasslands of the steppe. The Rus soldiers asked him to do so.

Bihar carried her and the baby into the back of his donkey cart, and then swooped up her little daughter who sat beside her. "Idillah, idillah," she gasped, thanking him, taking his hand and calling it the hand of God.

"Atil?" He asked. He thought she pointed the way to the Khazar city of Atil.

"Atil is wasted on this Rosh Hashanah, but not on the next or the next after that when I shall bring this Torah to the rabbis in Jerusalem," he said sadly.

"Idillah," she repeated in her own tongue. "Yes, idillah," at last he responded in her own language. Hashem will provide for the rabbis in Jerusalem until I can deliver this scroll. If it survived from Baghdad to Kiev in the last generation, it will survive in this generation to be returned to Jerusalem."

"I have learned Arabic long ago from rabbis in your great center of learning. When Baghdad is done with her wars against my people, I shall return there to study, speaking your tongue as well as any emir. From a priest in Damascus, I have learned Aramaic. And from those like you in my Khazaria, I have learned Hebrew."

"Who will light a candle in memory of my language, after this Rosh Hashanah tonight?" Bihar retorted, narrowing his eyes. "What Mishnah will I write at Javneh for my people? And where will I celebrate next Rosh Hashanah?"

She covered Bihar with blessings. He slowly drove the donkey cart toward the monastery that had a resting place open to all. A visiting Armenian priest provided from his own to help the villagers when the Byzantine priest's well ran dry. The Rus prince's soldiers had destroyed all the Khazar places of sanctuary.

At the end of the narrow, dark street a little boy was limping, his hands waving wildly. "Go away, get back!" The Rus soldiers were shouting at him in languages he did not understand. Bihar stopped and leaped toward the boy who scratched at the slivers in his bare feet.

"Where is your mommy?" Bihar asked.

"Where do you come from?" The boy said and repeated with glassy eyes. "Where is mummy?"

He had lost his mind. Bihar carried him off to the monastery's room of hospice.

With his hand extended, Bihar stopped cold as he stared at its golden door knocker made in the image of a human hand.

"Hashem," Bihar whispered. "The hand of the Creator..." Outside the monastery there was another cart. Bihar turned to look inside, thinking it was empty.

He jumped back. Five little children, one a baby of two weeks, lay there, as white as if they were made of alabaster, and covered with blood.

One by one Bihar took them out. They were put on the plank with their mother and covered up. They were those who had been left in the ruins, in order to take care of the wounded children who were still alive.

The father, arrested by soldiers, was unable to take his family further. Gently, Bihar picked up from the bottom of the cart a baby's sandal and put it in his pocket.

As soon as the rain stopped, nightingales by the dozens swarmed to pick grapes. Darkness fell like a fat snake in twenty coils amid the naked glory of

a blizzard of stars. The crescent moon rose over the deserted fortress at Sarkel. Bihar's donkey cart slid over a few feet between the mountains of the two halos, a snow-capped barren peak where Bihar knew he could spend the Day of Atonement that comes after Rosh Hashanah.

Bihar had returned to the monastery's sanctuary for the wounded. A Rus soldier was still there, dead against the wall with an ax and a small rivulet of blood running from his head. The Khazari donkey carts with many family's possessions were slowly burning against the blackish red sky.

"Where will you go?" An Armenian priest asked. He offered Bihar a plate of chickpeas and olives. "You can spend this Rosh Hashanah here with us. Our people and your people once lived together where the four rivers flowed out of the Garden of Eden. We were one people with you. Today your soldiers told me you perform miracles for your people. Maybe you should change your name to Nissim. In Hebrew it means miracles, he said. Your rabbi told me that. Why don't you eat?" He persisted. "I'm Ter Manuelian."

"I can't," Bihar shuddered. "I can't stand the smell of my own hands." The Father went down to the flagstones where three hundred Khazar refugees slept on the ground at the foot of a red lantern by the consecrated bread.

"Take this body for your sake." The Byzantine church service went on. "We share the church," the Armenian priest said. "The Greek in the morning.... The Armenian in the afternoon."

"Are you sure I'm really in the right place?" Bihar asked. The Armenian priest touched him gently on the shoulder. "You're a Jew now, and so is he." The priest pointed to an icon on the wall of the Armenian church.

Mothers taking refuge in the basement had no water to wash their babies. Children cried for food, and there was no more bread. The Father briefed the monks on what to say to Rus and Khazar soldiers. What do you say when two opposing sides fighting in a war have to share the same healing room day after day?

Suddenly a great healer entered the room. Bihar ran to meet him and thrust a document in front of the healer's face.

"What are you?" The healer asked, looking at Bihar's deeply-tanned face.

"I'm from Atil, a Jew."

"When you were Khazarian, you had a country, and you had the Caspian Sea. Now that you're a Jew, you belong to the caravans of the Silk Road."

"I have a country," Bihar announced. "When I pray, what direction do I turn to, Constantinople, Rome, or Jerusalem? Maybe the direction I should turn to when I pray should be straight upwards? In what direction do you pray?"

"Take it easy. I'm Jewish myself, from Kiev."

"This order has the royal Rus seal," said the healer.

"Why do I need a Rus seal, if I'm Kagan of the Khazars?" The order granted permission to bury the bodies that were piling up at the entrance of the monastery.

"We have no more carts or wagons," Bihar said. "I will follow the loyalty of my pet wolf-dog. We will walk together with my prized ass, better than any horse of the steppes from where I've traveled."

The heat of the next dawn brought the stench in waves, and the whole monastery had to burn all their incense in large gold lamps that swung on heavy chains from one end of the building to the other. The priest did the hardest work. Bihar handed covers to him, walking in the blood with worms wriggling in it.

A Khazar Tarkhan rode up, a commander with no one to lead. "I'm coming to claim the body of Khatir, a dead Khazar."

"He's here," said the Armenian priest. "The rabbi will be taking him in a moment."

"His family paid to have him buried as a Jew," he added.

The Tarkhan left with the rabbi and one body in a wagon. Bihar stopped the wagon. "Can't you give aid to anyone else?" The dead were piled up outside. "How many can you fit in this wagon?" The rabbi said. Bihar watched the wagon driving away filled with occupants.

One by one, Bihar carried the bodies off. The limbs easily became detached from the bodies. Bihar carried once again the cart with the mother and her five children. Just as he was arriving with the people at a Jewish cemetery, the soldiers of the Rus prince rode up on their horses.

Prince Svyatoslav was there with his tall silver helmet on his head, and his soldiers who came in the great long ships they built in the style of the western Vikings. He didn't see the bodies. A long line of horsemen rode toward the burial fields.

Bihar swept off the cover from the bodies so Svyatoslav would take a look. The Khazari women saw it, and a Rus soldier shrank back.

"Cover it, cover it!" a Khazar craftsman shouted, jumping between Bihar and the Rus prince. "Cover it or you'll go blind as in the epic of Krolu of the Oghuz." Bihar obeyed.

Bihar and the rabbis entered the cemetery where a man was burying his wife and daughter. He strutted to the communal pit through the pestilential odor.

Bihar had passed over, one by one, the babies whose heads were opening up. "Baby sandals of blood," he muttered. "Would we be welcomed and treated this way in Jerusalem?" He stared through his hands.

"Do you think you can turn Jewish in four generations and deserve to be buried in Jerusalem?" The Rus prince shouted to Bihar. "I should first be in Jerusalem before you."

"Why? Is it important to you?" Bihar answered Svyatoslav.

"To be baptized in the River Jordan," the prince told him. "The war is not over for me. My mother has become a Christian and joined with Byzantium. But I always will be a pagan. And for you, royal Kagan of the Sea of the Khazari?"

"You will absorb my people, and you shall become us." Bihar replied.

Later Bihar staggered out of the cemetery, past two Khazar women. "I am that I am," one told him. "So to whom do you belong?"

A line of Khazarian youths with side curls wearing the lamb's wool hats of the Circassians hurried to see what a Byzantine church looked like. They walked

behind the donkey carts and fine steppe horses. The healers from Abkhazia and Chechnya taught them their warrior stick dance, the Sufi Zikr. When the Rus prince saw the dance, he forbade it forever.

"I'll never give up my Sufi Zikr dance," the Chechen healer told the Kievan and Abkhazian healers nearby. They all came, like wise men, drawn to war to heal or kneel.

Bihar met Chorpan, a Khazarian Jewish traveling scholar and merchant from Kiev whom he hadn't seen since he left his work teaching Bihar, years before. Old Chorpan had brought him itakh, puppies, when he was a boy.

"Come back with me to Kiev," Chorpan admonished the Kagan. "I have a great villa in Odessa and a house in Kiev that welcomes you."

Bihar felt comfortable with Chorpan, his regent and tutor for many years. "Where will I go? What will happen? I'm a Jew now. Nothing's the same. When I travel, people think I'm a Moslem from Persia on a pilgrimage."

"Who?"

"The Arabs. The Rus. The Byzantines. The Persians. The Turkic tribes."

"The Kagan is the last to know when the whole of Khazaria has been taken."

"Must I lose who I am? Is that the only recourse?"

"You have to belong to something," Chorpan said, slapping him on the back.

"Go; go along to help the others. In them you'll find out what side you belong on and where you are."

Near Sarkel a horse rolled into a ditch crushing new trees. A wagon driven by the son of a rich Persian merchant stopped.

"Are you headed for Kiev?" The young man said.

"Why are you riding in royal Khazar wagon?" Bihar asked.

"It's a Rus wagon now."

"That's my son's wagon."

Bihar's son crawled out from under a blanket in the wagon. "It's all right, father. The merchant is taking me away from this place." The Queen peered out from under a canopy. "We're going to stay with my sister in Kiev. A family of Jews from Prague married into another from Cologne. They came to Kiev to find a bride for their son."

Bihar nodded. "I'll send for you."

The wagon stopped in front of a burned-out village bakery. Rus soldiers looted loaves of bread.

"Stop it," cried the Armenian and Byzantine priests.

"Rabbi, rabbi, the priest called out. "Order this place closed."

The rabbi from Baghdad had the shop closed. Bihar went on the road again. The royal wagon passed a dead woman lying in a ditch.

"We're not going to Kiev," Bihar said. "Proceed west."

"Why?" Chorpan asked.

"Because I'm a no-man's land physician, a healer for all oppressed peoples of the world. I also have people I trust who have made a place for me in Polin, the land of rest. No one in Polin knows I'm Jewish. The Rus are ordering all Khazars to return to Kiev. Whom do the Rus fear most? Not the Khazars, not the Oghuz Turkic tribes, not the famine in the land of the Mongols, not their brothers in Byzantium, not Rome, but the sword of Islam.

"Where do I stand as Kagan of the Khazari? If not for me, the entire world would have one religion, and guess what that one religion would be? Where shall I stand without a land? It is we, the Khazari, who allowed the prince's Slavs freedom from war and famine. And how does he thank us? By destroying Khazaria."

"People covet their neighbor's herd when their own bread basket is full," Chorpan wailed sadly in a minor key.

He strummed the strings of his instrument, tipped his tymakh, and whistled to the clickata of his horse's steps. Soldiers of Prince Svyatoslav rode in front of the Khazari caravan, arrows pointing toward them and their cities. Voices

blared across the steppes while wild horses and swift running asses from Persia whined.

"You must leave now for Kiev or go back where you came from. If you don't, your houses will be destroyed."

"Go back where? Do you see us living in yurts or homes? We are many from different places," Bihar told the soldiers. "Khazaria is not only a seasonal grazing field for wandering Turkic tribes. Jewish refugees from Byzantium, Persia, Mesopotamia, and all the lands of Europe have flooded into our realm for at least the past two hundred years."

Bihar rocked back and forth. "These refugees gave us their Hebrew heritage. Send us to Jerusalem. In what direction do you turn when you pray?"

Bihar jumped out of his bier. "Where are you going to send them, back to Baghdad? What about those from Constantinople or Kiev?"

A dead woman carrying two loaves of bread lay in the same ditch for two days. Bihar dug a hole under a rock and buried her with the bread.

"Go find two rabbis," Bihar shouted to Chorpan. "Go!" He repeated. A burial party was quickly formed. Bihar prayed with them, according to ritual. In the monastery, Bihar passed by two wounded children who had gone mad. A Jewish healer came in leaving his weapons of war outside.

"What are you doing?" Bihar asked, watching the healer work.

"I'm pinning a name to each of the wounded. It is because as different as people may be, everyone in battle now reminds me of Prince Svyatoslav's soldiers far away back home. So many warriors are coming even to the ends of the Earth or here."

The priest nodded to the healer, and then quickly pulled Bihar aside. "You're in a monastery of healers and priests from Armenia who are here to meet with the Byzantine monks in their outpost. During this war their healers saved hundreds of Khazari Jews by hiding them. It's not good for Prince Svyatoslav's men to come here."

Bihar carried back the wounded from the villages to the monastery. Horses ran wild, and most of the carts and wagons were stolen. Soldiers from both sides lay unburied in the wheat fields.

Bihar's mind went back to another war in which he fought as an ally, in the Caucasus. The people he had been hiding out with, the Adyghe, Shopsugs, and Abkhazian Circassians were accused of welcoming the Imams of Islam as liberators from the threat of the Slavic princes. Svyatoslav was ruthless in hunting down the collaborators who had welcomed Bihar posing as a fellow Moslem from the Caspian. The dead looked the same as those on the steppes of the Caucasus.

"I've played double agent and spy too long. I have to take a side. Now that my son has accepted the Jewish faith like his father, I can't risk staying a King of a thousand disguises any longer," Bihar told Chorpan.

The next day a tense and tedious grey tone rose inside Bihar like a madhouse. Back in his makeshift dwelling, camped on a field of dry grass, he checked his weapons see whether they were ready for battle.

His contact from Atil was the Khazar Tarkhan, Baghatur, whose name meant brave warrior. Bihar's last hope, his infinity of mirrors, his new leader, must live. He was a rubber stamp in the hands of his rulers. Baghatur watched two cockroaches running across the lush Persian carpet.

"Books don't break. Books are better than people," he told Bihar. A cool breeze from the shadowed lattice rushed over his wet body.

On the horizon a taupe slit swallowed a blue bay battle tents. In the distance, Bihar watched the light above the gates of one home below; he saw the carvings and wondered whether the crescent above the door stood for Islam or the old Moabite moon god that came from Ur? The old crescent represented the downward curves of the Tree of Life. He had the same Cow symbol on the doors of palace at Sarkel.

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Baghatur's crude weapon again jutted from the shadowed lattice. "Give me a better reason for this," Bihar whispered. Baghatur remained silent; only his green-gold eyes were alive.

"You can get away with anything because you are more a healer than a Kagan," Baghatur told him. "You can't go to Kiev. They will find you there. Where will you go, to Byzantium? They will find you there, too, and also in Armenia. Persia is not the right place. Do we go east or west, my Kagan?"

"I'll send for the Khatun and my son in the one place they won't find me. Let everyone else think I went where I can be the healer at the Caliph's court in Egypt or Cordoba."

When he finally left the area, Bihar felt so well again. He had donned the swaddling robes of an Imam. "No one stops a religious teacher on his most holy pilgrimage to Mecca. Look at my face. Is this not the face of a pilgrim from Samarkand or a Pharaoh of the Nile?"

Bihar was a nomad again forgetting his isinglass trade and his apple orchards where the Volga flows into the Caspian (the Sea of Meotis). Now Bihar's animal plodded against the hot winds of the open roads. "Cordoba is a lifetime away," he told his new traveling companions. "Maybe we should go to the great synagogue in Prague?"

"No, I hear the Jews are walled into that city," Baghatur roared. "Who knows when they will be allowed to mingle with the other citizens as a free people. It may take centuries."

"Who will dare forget Jerusalem?" Bihar's eyes shone as he spoke in a quiet voice.

"You have no blood ties to the Jews of King David's Jerusalem."

"Neither did Ruth, the Moabitess."

"Ruth was a woman of the Syrian deserts."

"My Caspian deserts share the same sunshine."

"Why are we going to Jerusalem?" One companion asked as he rode beside Bihar. "Cordoba is our new Jerusalem."

"No, not now. Two hundred years ago, it was. But I hear now the Visigoths' descendants are fighting the Moors there. What nation today wants us to be

a citizen of their lands? Tell me, and I shall pray Hashem to inscribe it for all time in the Book of Life."

"All in good time. To get to Jerusalem, I must first create the right seals and parchments to become the healer to the royal court of the Caliph. Before I can do that, I must learn more about who really rules Jerusalem from behind the latticed shutters. I must enter Jerusalem only when I've first met my destiny in Egypt."

"I'm taking my family north by west," Baghatur said. "I need land to farm."

"And I seek people to heal," said Bihar. "Perhaps I can make miracles happen again."

#

On his way throngs of people under the olive trees were sleeping in the open air. They came from all directions "What's happening here?" Bihar asked.

"We're not allowed to go back to the town," a priest told him. "They're burning the town."

"Who?"

"The children."

Two Khazari rabbis walked down the road carrying prayer books. One of them put a finger on his Cherkessk (Circassian) kindshall, a fine blade, as Bihar smiled to him. "Is it heavy?"

They stood face to face. The other Khazar asked him where he was going. "The new Jerusalem, Bihar replied."

"Don't go to Cordoba," the old man answered. "There are too many healers and rabbis there already, and the Caliph is sending them to Egypt."

"Go directly to Jerusalem," the younger added, putting down his heavy sacks. "I'm a healer with the wisdom of Cathay and all the Silk Road from here to Baghdad, a man of a thousand disguises," Bihar sighed. "I speak the words of many prophets."

"In Jerusalem you'll end up as a soldier in the army of Islam, if you disguise yourself as a pilgrim from Persia."

"I'm not going to go as a pilgrim from Persia. The Arabs will not know what to expect from a nomad of the Gobi deserts, perhaps from Samarkand and further east. Look at my fine cheekbones and the way my eyes slant down at the corners. You can't tell how many people along the Silk Road are parts of me now. The herbs of the world and these energy meridian needles of Cathay with which I heal come from the great walled road. And look at these needles so fine, the light passes through them. With these, I can heal you at points where your energy radiates."

"The medicines are used up everywhere. Go north. You will be needed in the northern countries."

"Go to Karelia," the younger man interjected. "No Finnish man one will know you there, or care. But you always will be welcome there. Travel until you reach the western edge of the Urals. You will be needed there more than anywhere else." The two men turned around and left.

Twenty Years Later:

Nazareth, June 985 of the Common Era

The Khazari Kagan's fine acupuncture needles from along the Silk Road's gateway to China earned him the reputation of a miracle healer. Twenty years passed, and Bihar found himself far from the caravans of his Silk Road, in Nazareth, amidst Christian Arabs who welcomed his skills as a healer. Again, he was in disguise. He found Baghatur sitting on his own rooftop, drinking lemon tea from tiny cups and playing backgammon.

"The Christian Arab dwellers of Nazareth were relieved to see us," said the Bihar, the spy. Baghatur long ago had joined Bihar in the Caucasus and went with him to the Holy Land to seek a new trade and a serene life.

"This is no land for warriors," Baghatur insisted. "All I want in my elder years is peace."

"The soldiers of Islam have always won." Bihar reminded him. "Maybe we didn't want to fight any more for what's outside ourselves when the courage we must fight for most lies inside us."

"I would have fought for a free Caucasus (Kafkas), for the twelve tribes of the Cherkessk," Baghatur said.

"And what of the twelve tribes of Israel?"

"Are we really Levites, descendants of the lost tribe of Simeon?" Baghatur asked. "Or did our rabbis invent that story so we could all become priests in the synagogues of the world?"

"Why is it important to you? What difference would it make? If you go back to a world before Abraham, we are all in the same boat together. Can't you see we come from and go back to the same place? The whole world is in that same boat together this moment-and forever."

"We'd be judged as traitors if we think that," Baghatur said as he scratched a twig along the earth-top roof.

"Why? Isn't Khazaria a state of mind today?" Bihar looked at Baghatur sharply. "Your own son doesn't even remember Atil. His children will never hear of it."

Bihar's son, Mart climbed the stairs to join the two older men on the rooftop garden. "How would the Moslems here treat you if someday the other sidemaybe Jews, maybe Christians, maybe outlanderswin this land in battle?" Bihar asked. "It has been won before by many, and all have had their turn. What place will last forever?"

"Well, Islam won, and we Khazari Jews will be left in peace as always during these wars, as long as we pay our taxes for protection," said Marot.

"See all these Christians here and Moslems over there?" Bihar smiled.

"So?" Mart stretched his neck to hear his father's answer.

"Some of them could be Jews who lived here in the time of King David. And when the land changed owners, they took the religion of whoever held the power of that century. Not all of them left for Spain, Loire, or Cologne. Only those who kept their beliefs or wanted land or a different life left. Many were forced to leave, of course, but not all."

Bihar shrugged and ate bread with his grown son, dipping his crust in crushed garlic and olive oil. "This land was not emptied when the Romans left. There were those who stayed here because they wanted to, and other Jews from Damascus or Antioch came to live here as well as Christians and later Moslems.

"You see? Bihar sighed. "We come from everywhere here. So why not from Khazaria, too? Do you really think because we left Khazaria that Khazaria left us? Who lives in Khazaria today? The same people alongside other people who came in later. And they live next to those who were in Khazaria long before we came. Who knows from where we began to roll our wagons?"

"Maybe the steppes or maybe the deserts, or maybe the highest peaks of the mountains. That's the way it is everywhere when lands change hands." Baghatur sipped his lemon tea. Bihar drank from his water skins as they made a fleshy sound slapping against the ruined stones."

"It's a small place to hide so many people who want to live near the sacred places. Too bad the places that have few people don't have more of these holy places that attract worship and trade. For where there's worship, there's more trade," Baghatur added.

The next morning was another hot day in July, and Bihar went along the road between the fields of wheat. Women were starting to work the fields again. The children carried sheaves on their heads. Everything had to be done by hand.

#

Nablus

In Nablus, life went with no work. The food was gone. And not enough healers had arrived yet. There, the people welcomed Bihar to mix his herbs and alchemy and use his acupuncture needles on their energy points. They wondered whether he made miracles.

He passed an old farmer wearing a large Greek cross. "Keev Halik?" How are you? Bihar in his finest Arabic asked the man-how he was.

"Forget me," the farmer waved back.

"Your crops are still rotting?" Bihar asked.

"I had to sell my farm cheap." The farmer laughed tensely.

"So did my forefathers in the Kafkaz, the Caucasus," Bihar answered, and also in the delta where the Volga flows into the Caspian. My apple orchards grew there for generations." He waved to the north with a pointed finger.

"Are you Circassian from Mount Elbrus or from the mountains of Dagestan or from the steppes?"

"Cherkessk? What difference would it make to you from where in the Caucasus I dwelled? Does the left side of the Black Sea mean more to you than the right side of it? There's enough fish at both ends to feed the world."

"Where are you going?" The farmer shielded his eyes from the sun with his hands.

"I'm going to Jerusalem."

"Jerusalem? You see the thefts? That's the road to Jerusalem. So much is passing through the villages." The farmer spat. "Watch your gold."

"Highway robbers?"

"Many," the farmer nodded. "From everywhere in the world. That place is the crossroads of the universe."

"Better for good trade, then and warmer winters." On the road to Jerusalem Bihar passed returned inhabitants and flattened mud brick houses. Children were sleeping in the rubble.

"No water." Bihar told the farmer.

Many had come back to the ancient village, returning to a wreck. "There's nothing to eat. Go to Nablus," the farmer told Bihar.

When he arrived, Bihar found the children pounding on doors to beg food. Older people were beginning to move back to the ruins. The inhabitants were refugees of another war, and Mart helped them rebuild small houses, now demolished again.

Bihar stood in front of the homes of the village elders.

"I need bread-three loaves per family," he demanded.

"Go home, Circassian. Life has returned to normal," the elders told him.

"I'm not Circassian-Cherkessk" he said in Arabic to the Christians. "Why is it important to you what I am if I come as a healer with these instruments of health?" His son motioned to him to be silent.

"Go, Armenian," someone shouted to him. "Find us bread to feed the children."

The road again ... past Ramallah. Bihar saw three villages go to the bread kneaders. The houses were burned or flattened, but this time, he didn't know by whose soldiers. "What side am I on now?" Marot asked Bihar.

"The side that God chooses you to be," Bihar said sadly.

"What if the divine will is that decisions are mine to make?"

"Father, we should have gone to Djerba. On that island, Jews live in peace."

"We are not welcome in Djerba because there's a rumor I've heard that they believe Levites have been cursed."

"But we are Levites because we ourselves decided that we are Levites." Mart walked beside his father. "Can't we decide as well that we are Cohens and go to Djerba as Cohens? After all, we have married for generations with Jews coming from everywhere from Persia and Baghdad to Toledo and Prague-only to ask us to come to their rescue when they were under oppression in many lands."

"Don't tell me what I already know," said Bihar. "There are Jews in Constantinople who need us. We must send our Khazari there where we are needed most. Don't you know that the Jews in Constantinople have been walled in next to the leper colony near Parma? We must set them free so they can live anywhere. And we must start by healing those in Jerusalem. That's how the word gets out along the trade routes."

Alone in the dead silence, donkeys scratched the ruins. Furniture was abandoned in the middle of the road.-Pots were strewn about. There was no time to take anything.

Bihar stopped by an adjoining farm to watch the women and children cultivate fields that stretched beyond borders that changed each day.

#

Bethlehem, July 985 of the Common Era-Well ahead by years of the First Crusade from Europe that would arrive close to Rosh Hashanah of those times...a century later.

Bihar roamed the streets to watch the feverish selling. Who could succeed in selling a plate, a scarf, a trinket? Buyers bargained for the lowest price.

Each year on Rosh Hashanah, a new army with a different belief tried to conquer the sacred land, in the way of too many cross roads of time and trade, its nation's coins became worthless. Bihar threw away his.

Boys dressed in white robes ran from one street vendor to the next. When the merchandise and foods on the Christian side were empty, the boys had to buy their bread and lentils in the many more Moslem shops at three times the price.

The few Jewish bazaars remained hidden in houses behind shutters, houses along dark and winding streets that one could not find without knowing whom to visit. And there were still fewer stalls that served the Armenians, the Greeks, the Circassians, and European traders. Every nationality had its niche from whom it bought food and trinkets.

Bihar thought as he looked at the array of diversity. Would he drink their coffee or herbal teas? Would he eat their food? Did they mix meat and milk at the same meal? Would he betray his many disguises? He healed all of them. "I am the miracle worker here," he told Mart. Mart laughed back at his father. "All this change only means nothing will ever change on the inside."

#

Hebron

Bihar, in still another disguise and different robes came to a tiny village and counted twelve flattened houses. "I wonder who is settling the accounts this time?"

Soldiers of the Caliph rode up to him. "Leave your houses if you want to save your lives."

"Salamoo Aleikum." Peace be with you. I am El Hajj, on a pilgrimage to Mecca from Samarkand." Bihar argued in a sing-song voice of Central Asia. He squinted at the corners of his dark eyes. This time destiny had disguised him in white robes as an Imam.

The last soldiers he met learned he was an Imam from Bokhara. He knew more merchant's watering holes along the Silk Road, their names, customs and dialects than the Emperor of Cathay. Four Arab-speaking soldiers turned their horses. "Then be on your way, quickly."

He walked through the village looking for fresh horses of his own. But no one was around except the old people pouring out of the crumbling village. An old woman tried to get Bihar's attention. "I think we're both in the wrong place today." He found himself wandering aimlessly. The woman asked Bihar whether he was a Jew. Bihar nodded.

"A man didn't leave quickly enough because his wife went into labor. He was killed."

"You would have seen worse in my Khazar city of Atil."

The woman touched the back of her hand to her chin. "And where I came from, if they thought you walked by their wells. It was even worse than that, and I'm far from your homeland."

"And where do I belong?"

Glances of hatred from below and above-glances of contempt... Bihar passed through the crowds, his contorted face glistening. Leaves swept past him to the river as rootless as himself, and ropes of smoke curled around his white and gold robes.

A woman carrying a calabash on her head closed one eye and cursed, "May the earth belly dance so their houses fall on their heads."

"Once you leave, you can't go back," a soldier shouted to Bihar.

He took the road to Jerusalem. "I'm an Imam on a pilgrimage to Mecca, he told the soldier. I have permission to go everywhere," Bihar told the soldier. He gestured back speaking in Arabic. "Wa' Aleikamoo Salam" Peace be upon you.

"Be careful," Marot said. "Messages between separated families are forbidden."

"How many days to Jerusalem?"

The soldier held up his hand. Again, Bihar changed his disguise to that of an Azeri-speaking healer, resorting to Arabic when he met the Caliph's soldiers. Doors opened. It was dawn when Bihar awoke in Jerusalem. The sounds were maddening. He eagerly sat by the gate. Bihar waited for fighting soldiers in the streets to pass by.

"Where did you learn Arabic?" A soldier asked Bihar.

"Baghdad. The Silk Road winds through many lands, all of whom need those who heal the lame."

He held up a bag of herbs, a sack of za'atr, the black seeds from Egypt that heal, and his fine acupuncture needles given to him by a merchant of the Emperor of Cathay along the Silk Road when he was a young prince of the Khazars. The needles had healed for thousands of years at the eastern end of the Silk Road. They had bought him his life and fortune wherever he traveled.

They went on. A priest arrived with three dying children on a bier. Bihar carried them into a sanctuary of shadowed arches, a place where in the lands he had seen, a Khan would have hidden wives behind silent, dark lattices. He heard the sound of cool fountains on fragrant jasmine petals.

All at once Bihar's freedom of action in a moment had become meaningless. A little trail of saliva left his lips. "Why am I afraid to tell anyone who I am? No place is safer than the desert. It's only in cities that there is danger." Bihar's son grabbed his father's forearm. "When I marry, what should I tell my children?"

"The truth," Bihar said sharply.

"And if I forget thee, O' Khazaria will my right hand forget its healing?" Mart teased.

"My respect for Khazaria is growing as deep as the calluses grow on my hands." Bihar went inside to guard the hospital window.

Bihar's throat clicked in tight knots. He rubbed his bag of herbs against his cheek, to make the fear go away. Bihar's eyelids fluttered and he dropped back, away from the latticed shutters.

He gazed at the empty street. The walls around him seemed to evaporate. Terrible, silent tears dropped to his shoulder.

Exiled kings were not welcomed anywhere, he thought, but in Jerusalem, there was always an open door for a healer whose potions worked well with the poor and the rich. Bihar covered his mouth with his forearm, as if to hide his own darkness.

Memories of a youth riding white stallions alongside his beloved pet grey wolves in Atil returned. Then the memories flooded his vision, memories of years he spent in Mashad, Persia, from the days he sailed from one end of the Caspian Sea to the other and up the Volga to his homeland.

Mart nudged him from his dream. "So this is Jerusalem," he said, nodding as he looked around.

"It should have felt different," Bihar sighed. "I feel a sense of exclusion in an off-limits city."

"What do you say we don our Islamic robes?" Marot asked.

"Yes," he answered twisting a fresh Imam's turban around his head. "Infidels are often assaulted in the bazaars. They are refused lodging in pilgrims' hostels and haircuts by barbers."

"What about Jewish life here? Are there any others like us, from Khazaria?" Mart whispered.

"There must be some," Bihar replied. It reminds me of the year I spent with your mother's family in Mashad. But that's Persia, not Khazaria. Jewish life in Mashad officially came to an end on the tenth of Muharram.

"Your mother reminded me that her family had no hope other than the grace of the Almighty, the coming of the Messiah, or the arrival of the Khazars. They got the Khazars to protect them from oppression from the outside world."

"The arrival of the Khazars?" Mart laughed. "Since when would a Jewish woman of Persia marry a Khazar?"

"When none beneath the royal Kagan, our spiritual leader, could have this woman..."

He remembered how he had been forced into the Caucasus. Jewish Hajjis had long been detouring through Mecca, leaving other pilgrims in Egypt and taking a boat to Jaffa.

Secret Jews. In Jerusalem they prayed at both Moslem and Jewish holy places: the Dome of the Rock and the Western Wall. Bihar joined other secret Jewish hajji, one of a band of secret Mashadi Jews from Persia who came back to Persia from Mecca by way of Khazaria to bring other secret Jews the news of Jerusalem's growing Jewish settlement.

"My soul will not be flushed out into the bay through my father's anger," Bihar told himself. Now, aware of the wafting incense, the smells of Jerusalem, Bihar focused his thoughts on the present.

Music of the kanoun with its 86 strings wailed in nuances of delight in a distant room, and the spicy scents of cinnamon and cloves crossed his senses. A bowl of fava beans was hurled from a window to join the garbage below.

In war without a family, you go crazy, he surmised. This was Bihar's third war.

"It almost never rains in July." Bihar was startled by the feminine voice. He whirled around to see the silhouette of a young woman standing behind him.

"The rain. It's pouring again. It never rains in July."

Bihar cleared his throat. "Khatun, how did you get here without me?"

"I grew tired of waiting to grow, my husband. For years I've watched how you heal the sick, the tortured, and the old. I've learned much from you, as much as you learned from my peoples. It's time I helped you finish what you came

here to realize." Khatun leaned against the window sill. Bihar looked up at her broad face. Dark ash brown curls spun out from under her white robes.

"I'll show you where I have been, where no one knows I'm the Khatun, the Queen of the Khazars, if you don't mind a place where the rain comes in." He led his horses, walking beside her.

"Rain," Khatun sighed. "In Mashad, my home in Persia, it was forbidden for a Jew to go outside in the rain, for fear of contaminating rainwater which might then touch a non-Jew."

"I played many roles to get here," Bihar told her as she embraced him and her grown son to welcome them home. "I was a good Circassian Moslem from Dagestan whose family went to Persia. I played Imam from Tashkent on a pilgrimage. The Silk Road is an open book of many peoples. All you had to play was a mother of nations. Could this only happen in Khazaria, my queen?"

"Or in Mashad?" She looked at him like a dove.

Mart and Khatun sat beside Bihar. It was an eternity ago that he talked like this with a woman, that the healer no longer had to disguise himself as a king without a country.

"Jerusalem is the only city to which kings without their lands return. Tell that to the scholars who visit us from Spain."

"It's where everyone crosses paths with everyone else." Mart concluded.

"So where do we go from here?" Bihar looked wide-eyed at his wife and only son.

"Listen." Bihar interrupted.

"I don't hear anything."

"That's it. The silence Not even a bird is singing.

"The fighting has stopped."

"For how long?" Khatun asked.

Khatun, Bihar, and Mart listened to the energy in one another. Metal became flesh and human turned machine.

"You were right that the more things change, the more they.." Khatun was interrupted by a rabbi walking down the cobbled stones with a crooked stick.

"They say you can heal. Please come. I need you to help my children." Bihar and Khatun brought Marot with them.

"Yes, all of us will be with you. This is my husband, Bihar, but here you may call him Nissim, for it is said Hashem has performed miracles of survival all these years for him and his animal companions so that we may be here with you for Rosh Hashanah after so many years of traveling. We are healers. We must go and help. Our duty is to repair the world if we are told somewhere it is in need of repair, give charity, and care for one another."

"Nissim?" The rabbi said as he nodded, smiling. He greeted a Greek Father passing beside him. He nodded, smiled and greeted the local Imam passing on his other side. "Nissim?" He repeated to Bihar. "The name means miracles. We need your touch everywhere. And where are the Torah Scrolls you were to restore to Jerusalem by Rosh Hashanah so many years ago? We all have grown up or old waiting for you and those scrolls from Kiev."

"Perhaps we, the people are the scrolls," said Bihar. Here," Bihar sang out with delight, as he quickly gave them to the rabbi standing next to him. "I've been waiting for your scrolls since you left Kiev. My hair has turned white while waiting." Have a joyous Rosh Hashanah, even if it took you several years to ride here on the back of that ass." The rabbi pointed to his animal companion.

"Better than all the horses of the steppes that I have trained," laughed Bihar as he patted his loyal friend.

"And here's one who has never left my side, even when my children doubted their father's word. My dog and the ass I have rode upon, by the hand of Hashem, have survived all these years when they were only supposed to live but fourteen years after I left Kiev. Yet they are here today. What a miracle.

"That your name now be Nissim, a man of miracles," said the rabbi with awe. A tame wolf dog reared its silver head from its hiding place, eagerly licking

the hand that fed it along the trodden paths to the great crossroads of all trade and all holy.

"This Rosh Hashanah, we welcome all our friends and animal companions that have stood by our side welcoming the New Year," Bihar said.

"Ah yes," the rabbi nodded. "These scrolls have been passed from hand to hand all the way from Baghdad to Kiev, and from Kiev to Jerusalem where they will serve for our Rosh Hashanah. "Come, now, let's dine on the sweetest fruits of this year's harvest."

"And what would that be?" Bihar asked. "Tell me how your acupuncture needles repair the world and how they give charity. I want to see what you have brought from the Silk Road to Kiev and from Kiev to Jerusalem that harvests righteousness for the New Year with atonement."

"Atonement, yes, that comes next," Bihar said. But he added. "Let's also call atonement a day of at-one-ment' as well. After all, we are at one with the fruits of the Earth one week and that which is higher than ourselves ten days later."

"Spoken like a great learned scholar," the rabbi said as he led the family to the place where they would spend Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur in Jerusalem in the year 986 of the Common Era.

"And how is everyone back in Kiev? The rabbi asked.

"The scribes are busy with their books." Bihar reported.

#

Song Lyrics of the Silk Road Healers

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Not since Sarkel set on fire.
Not since Samandar moved to Spire.
Not since Khatun called Khagan,"Cutie."
Not Since Khazaria went to Kievan booty.
Not since Bulan turned from pagan.
Lit the candles, and became the Khagan.

Not since Svyatoslav went to hire
Pechenegs from his transpire.
Not since yarmaq coins were minted.
Not since isinglass trade was hinted.
Not since Khazars fought oppression.
Not since Atil sank in depression.
Not since Samandar went underwater.
Not since Byzantines married Khagan's daughter.
Not since Ha-Sangari converted the people.
Not since Balanjar became a steeple.
Not since the steppes stepped lively to a tune.
Not since Khazaria, did the sky ride the moon.

#

Directory of Sources for Khazar names in this story:

1. Bihar* 1. Armenian version of the Life of Saint Stephen of
Sugdaia, cited in Gero p. 22.

2. Tarkhan* means commander or general of the Khazari
(Khazars from Khazaria)

3. Itakh* means young dog: puppy. Tabari, Ibn al-Athir, and Ibn
Khallikan, cited in Marcel Erdal's article "Ein umbemerktter
chasarischer Eigenname" in Türk Dilleri, Aratirmalari 1 (1991),
pp. 31-36. Also to be discussed in a study by Marcel Erdal.

4. Woman's Name: Khatun, means Queen or Lady. 58. Lewond,
cited in Golden p. 196-197; Ibn Atham al-Kufi, cited in Golden p.
196-197.

5. Marót* Anonymous, cited in Douglas Dunlop's article "The
Khazars" in The Dark Ages: Jews in Christian Europe, 711-1096
(1966), p. 348.

These sources for Khazarian first names for males and females
cited and 62 more cited resources researched by Christian
Settipani and Kevin Alan Brook are listed at the Khazarian Names
Web site at <http://www.khazaria.com/khazar-names.html>. The
story above is fiction by novelist Anne Hart and only five of the

Khazarian first names included in the resource list are mentioned in this story.

4. **"So Let's Have The Story," The Baghdad Reporter Asked Impatiently.**

Sunday Morning in Baghdad

"Where did you learn to use a gun like a sewing machine?" The eager TV reporter imbedded in the special squad asked impatiently and sagely but not mockingly.

Dr. Tanya, diplomat, fourth generation Red Army Faction exobiologist in Iraq, checked her rifle—a Kalashnikov, for firing. Using gravitons—gravity waves as radio waves to communicate the reporter's news as entertainment with extraterrestrial life in the parallel universe next door fascinated the young doctor.

She wanted to savor the aura and appearance of it. Connection meant tunneling. Communication became the life force. But her goal remained barred by an eleventh dimension barrier humans could not yet breach—except by sending TV news using gravitons because only gravity could pass between parallel universes where radio waves were weak.

She threw the plastic replica of her own head (with the bullet-hole between the eyes) down the incinerator, along with the meager belongings of the deceased look-a-like actor she paid to play her ex-partner, Kyzyl. "So you're a descendant of Genghis Khan, are you?" The flamboyant reporter smirked. "Funny," he smiled, trying to distract himself. "You don't look like John Wayne."

She ignored him. Soldiers strolled below her high-rise apartment window, the evening after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. Dr. Tanya had the Kalashnikov trained on a group of teenage women, below as they rocked their baby carriages.

The last recalcitrant rays of August sunlight washed Baghdad's crowded streets. A caravan of military tanks slid over a few feet between the Mountains of the Two Horns, a yellow barren stone and stopped beside the Tigris.

The TV reporter watched two cockroaches running across the carpet, onto the tile. "Machines don't break. Machines are better than people," he told Tanya. A cool breeze rushed over his damp chest.

On the horizon, a salmon slit swallowed a blue bay of petrified houses. In the distance the gas-burning oil wells presented an eternal flame of money. Hours passed.

Tanya watched the light above the gates of a mud-brick house below. She saw the carvings and wondered whether the crescent above the door stood for the downward curves of the Tree of Life.

Tanya bought a similar ancient, Sumerian relic in Basra, dated 3,800 B.C. She hung the same horned symbol on the doors above her office in the Russian Consulate in Los Angeles.

Fiction can truly design one's personality, she thought. Who am I this month? A player in the theatre of war, she pondered. To have diplomatic immunity, to commit diplomatic crime--as a mercenary and a research scientist--that is my life, but who am I tomorrow morning?

Governments made sure she found everything ready and at her disposal for each new exquisite fantasy. And the most dramatic of fantasies was not playing soldier of fortune in Iraq tonight, but war inside an intimate relationship.

Who am I this moment? Tanya studied her reflection in the mirrored window shutters. Soldiers of fortune are absolute suckers for dramatic solutions to a war, she thought.

The reporter swallowed a handful of fava beans and washed it down with tea. "What are you doing?"

"Watching someone give birth."

Across the courtyard, Tanya lifted her binoculars toward a window with a half-drawn shade. Inside, a heavy, naked woman squatted on a birth chair. Her ten children encircled her, until her husband led them out of the room.

The woman bore down to push out the baby, twisting a prayer rug between her teeth and making animal noises. The guttural sounds grew so loud that the reporter shouted, "Who's making love with such emotion? It's very arousing."

Tanya laughed like a witch. "There's a woman having a baby across the street not making one, darling!"

"Well, it's unmanning me. I'd rather produce a travel show."

"Let the sword decide."

"Decide on politics or money?"

"It's an ancient Fertile Crescent proverb. The sword gives life in the form of the ancient sign of the umbilical cord cutter--the Sumerian written symbol for woman. Think of it--woman symbolized by the knife!"

"Like a sharp tongue that cuts with nagging words?"

"Shut up, Mr. TV Reporter. I'm paid well to finish this rotten job."

Her Kalashnikov again jutted out of the window. Between an opening in the tenements that rose above the mud-brick rectangles, her Iraqi contact watched her apartment complex and prepared to signal her at the right moment.

The new controller, the man who sat second in line to the power in Iraq, stood near his car and dabbed at the tears in his eyes. He began a speech of hope for his people, promising more free education, more free medical care, and more free housing. His voice grew angrier when he spoke of the downfall of those in office who kill those who criticize the one opinion in control.

Around the bend of buildings, at a forty-five degree angle from Tanya's window, a circle of young mothers stood rocking their baby carriages. They listened to the speech.

One young mother was the potential assassin. Tanya glanced at the suitcase of money she received. One Russian working for one American expatriate hiding in Central America paid her two million American dollars for taking out the potential killer of the new and secret strong boss--not yet in office.

Below, the teenage mother, covered in her black *abaya*, chatted on high key to other teenage mothers. The male relatives who escorted them to the souk to buy vegetables laughed loudly. The women straightened their babies' blankets.

On a nearby high-rise rooftop, a pulse of light bounced off a mirror. Inside the room, Tanya froze with fear. She fought it, bearing down on the fear like a woman bears down to push her womb empty. Tanya took aim with her arms slightly parted. She hugged the ledge. The walls evaporated.

Tanya emptied the clip into the woman. The teenage mother, who rocked her two-year old, now clutched her pregnant belly as the rounds passed through her navel, keeping her upright and driving her back against Tawil's bakery window and then through the glass.

The other women and their male escorts whirled around by the impact. The noise stopped, and the newest one in control never knew his life depended solely on Tanya.

Tanya peered through high power infra-red binoculars as the woman below tore at her belly. White flashes whammed across the woman's eyes.

Tanya turned up the high power and stared at the tattoo of three blue dots in the cleft of the woman's chin.

The full-lipped woman, a Mrs. Abdul Azziz Hamrah, also known as Om Ahmed (Ahmed's mother) fell. Her last scene before the final curtain turned the ancient Babylonian street again into a place where the air reeked of blood and manure.

The joy of directing and producing the scene was almost unbearable for Tanya. The power in her pornographic gun instantly catapulted her to stardom. "Capture it on film, Mister Tee Vee Foreign Correspondent!" She commanded with a silent hand signal.

Instantly, the TV reporter crouched at the window ledge with his video camera. She found the ambient hum distracting.

"I hate video tape," she whispered. "If only we had 35 millimeter film and a solid camera. It's not going to be broadcast quality in Moscow."

"Try getting a field camera on the midnight flight out of Iraq with a forged passport in the middle of an invasion," the reporter complained.

"Go away. Leave me alone. I can't function with you breathing down the back of my neck."

"You want this on tape or not?" The reporter argued. She pointed to the window. The reporter angled the camera, focused the long-distance lens for a close-up on the teenage mother's face in the street below. He checked the sound system. And the video tape whirled.

From Om Ahmed's body came a long, loud burr...of stinking bowel gas, like rotten eggs. Her mouth twisted like rubber, dropping open loosely with a little broken groan.

Bloody vomit gushed from her lips down the side of her cheek into her collar. Her honey-colored doe eyes rolled up, so only the whites showed, red-veined and dirty.

The new strong boss to be and not yet in control, heard nothing of the incident. His car moved several blocks away now, and he found a new audience to listen to his speech.

The woman's whole frame sank from her own sight along with surrounding objects, leaving the pain standing forth as distinctly as a mountain peak, as if it were a separate bodily member. At last her agony also vanished. The Iraqi contact went on amidst crackling, dusty applaud of his people.

I sculptured a Sphinx, Tanya thought. Why do they call it the Theatre Of War unless there's drama to be enacted?

The woman's kohl-lined eyes, long-lashed, like an Egyptian queen, stared. Her tongue dropped to one side. The one knee that bent up when she fell now flapped open wide apart.

Her baby's bottle broke and spilled juice in a winding stream to the banks of the muddy Tigris. The little boy slept in his carriage through the lightning grooves that marked his mother.

An old woman pulled off Om Ahmed's black *abaya* and edged her maternity blouse over her pale, oval face. A wrinkled face brushed her cheek. She unbarred Om Ahmed. The woman's fat thighs flapped apart, *haram*--forbidden, for anyone to see in public.

Om Ahmed's shaved, pubic region shone through transparent, nylon panties. Her heaped-wheat belly rose like the dome of the Rock. As she gave birth, Tanya took notes. And the camera rolled.

A midwife squatted on one knee and ripped open the dead woman's belly with a razor blade. Twin boys rolled out like pink basket balls, wailing loudly.

"I ought to get a medal for the accuracy of my target," Tanya urged. "Clean through the navel, between the bouncing twin boys without even grazing them."

"With a Kalashnikov? It's incredible. What if you used your Browning 9 millimeter instead?"

"From this height? Are you mad?"

The reporter quirked timorously, "Where'd you learn to use a gun like an International Harvester machine?"

"In medical school," she replied. "In Samarkand we use cadavers for target practice. That's why I left medicine for exobiology. I worked for so many years as a theoretical particle physicist that medical school seemed like an explorer's dream. I'm hungry for more adventure."

"So am I." The TV reporter gazed down at Om Ahmed's firm, wide breasts bared by every man's hands. Each nipple slowly sank from a brown bud into a shriveled flatness, like two deflated balloons.

"Boy, you really knocked the wind out of her," the reporter sputtered, choking on the smoky air.

"A second later, and the new hope for Iraq and our contact would be swimming in that pool." All that prolific motherhood flew out of the cow-goddess while Tanya's Kalashnikov far above smoked a curl of sulfuric stink.

Om Ahmed played artist at this moment. She captured the strong boss's audience. A crowd of painted dolls with babies, and mustached men, mouths filled with *pignola* (*pine*) nuts and 'palace bread' came running from the bakery. The men carried towels over their arms.

Tanya didn't see the entire canvas that caught the artist's painting. "To a surgeon, assassination is a fine art," Tanya said dreamily.

"You never practiced medicine, why?" The reporter asked. "What drew you into exobiology?"

"Science shapes politics genetically. Besides, I get to create the science news and broadcast it in my own way.

Tanya's thudding heart swelled until her lungs no longer had room to expand. "It's the ultimate healing tool." She kissed the opening of her Kalashnikov and began to clean it.

"In Moscow someone gave me a Bible once. I opened it at random and read Isaac's blessing of Esau: 'By the sword you will live, and you will serve your brother. And it will be, when you are brought down, that you will break his yoke from your shoulders.' There's a message for me in it. I never forgot it when I left Russia. Even there, being from Samarkand felt strange, since I'm of Ukrainian descent, and thank goodness, now a free woman devoted to science and world peace."

The reporter's staccato laughter echoed in the room. "I never heard a Russian scientist trained both as a physicist and exobiologist quoting the Bible before, especially not after a hit. The world is changing, isn't it? Do you belong to one of those Russian or Ukrainian evangelical sects that sought refuge in America?"

"I belong to my career as a scientist and to the world" said Tanya.

"Then what will you do when your employers force you to retire in old age?"

"Needlework." She leaped to her feet and pulled the reporter toward the window. They looked down as Om Ahmed disappeared into an ambulance. Far away now, the one in control resumed his speech as the television cameras rolled.

Tanya repeated by rote what she memorized from the Old Testament. "'And Yahweh will send you back to Egypt...in the road that I had told you that you would never see again; and you will sell yourselves there to your enemies as slaves, and no one will buy.'"

"What did you do, in Moscow, memorize the whole Bible?" She patted the reporter dominantly on his shoulder. Tanya pulled away from the heat of his palms on her shoulder.

"Samarkand and Moscow have little in common," Tanya said. Kurdistan is another story." She closed the shutters. "'Despoiled daughter of Babylon, happy is he who pays you back your payment as you paid us. Happy is he who takes hold and smashes your suckling babies against a rock.'"

The reporter shook his head violently. "Stop quoting the Bible. Stop it. You're ranting like a hallucinating savage panting after a territorial god."

Tanya took a deep breath. Something clicked inside her. She ran her fingers along the tense and tedious grey walls.

"That man whose life I saved is a rubber stamp in the hands of his rulers. He's Iraq's only hope. He must live. Iran's foreign soldiers of fortune must not take over Iraq today."

"Crap, I've heard he's nothing but a slimy drug dealer and antiquities smuggler," the reporter slurred. "And he's going to be the next President. The question is--of which nation—Iran, Iraq, or his own country somewhere in the Caucasus Mountains?"

"Who will they make him next time? I'm not talking about the Russians. I'm talking about the secret government in the United States above the President who pays us to make and break Presidents all over the Middle East, Asia, Latin America, and inside Russia."

She placed her Kalashnikov in an oblong luggage piece and slid it under the bed. "It's time to go."

The reporter put his American passport inside his shoe and took a forged Russian diplomatic pouch out of his suitcase. "It's amazing how far genuine birth certificates of dead American or Russian infants will go here."

"Who am I tonight?" The reporter asked.

"Vladimir of Tbilisi, a diplomat from the Abkhaz region of Georgia. Use the Russian name, not the Georgian passport."

"And you?"

"Another fictive personality, another American dollar...I'm Dr. Delores from Guatemala--a tropical diseases specialist. Does it matter? What's more important, is who I am next time. All identities can change in war. I speak seven languages, like Cleopatra did."

"You took money from the Arab oil leaders, the American billionaires, the Japanese, the Russians. Don't you have any scruples?"

"Yes. I'm a doctor on a mission to heal the world, and my healing tools are my weapons and my acupuncture needles for healing. I'll always be a surgeon. It's just that now there are more things that need surgical shaping."

"So that's how you shape your world." The reporter said impatiently. "Did you ever read the poem called 'If' by Rudyard Kipling?"

"Yes." She began to recite it rapidly. "If you can keep your head when all about you are losing theirs and blaming it on you..."

"I've memorized it in grade school," the reporter replied. They recited it together to pass time on the plane.

"You're the first person I've met who has memorized that poem, let alone heard of it," she told the reporter. "Where did you read it first?"

"At a Boston prep school," he replied.

"So your family had the money to send you to prep school?"

"My dad practiced veterinary surgery," the reporter sighed.

"And he didn't force you to go to med school?"

"I majored in English. Then I lucked out in my TV journalism internship. They actually picked me up when I finished my graduate degree in broadcasting and documentary videography."

Tanya smirked at the reporter. "So that's the real reason why they paired a new, young traveler with me instead of someone from CIA or MI5 with experience. So you've had your only experience with that Baghdad TV assignment for the past year?"

He grinned with exhaustion. "The American News Network could have sent me anywhere after my first nine months. I guess after that gestation, being born again here in Baghdad is the best training for being a news fountain, after all."

In an hour, they made the last flight to Moscow. By the next afternoon, Tanya and the reporter sat in on the final session of a week-long international medical conference on tropical diseases.

During the flight from Moscow to London, the reporter sprawled across two seats. Tanya watched the young man with beige, Panama hat snore, open-mouthed for hours.

Tanya wondered why men always spread their knees so wide apart to take up the maximum volume of space. She kept her legs crossed, trying to squeeze into the tiny space he allowed her. Finally, she nudged his elbow from the seat's armrest.

Tanya hated herself for a moment until she remembered her brother looked like this fetid-mouthed reporter. Only Sergei's rat-blue eyes squirmed in a row of subtractions, dashes, horizontal worms. She visualized little equations inching up the pages of her diary.

She slipped the empty diary into her purse. Tanya studied the reporter's baby-face twenty-five year-old features. His eyes weren't round. They were downturned, narrow dashes, bat's eyes seen sideways as transparent drops.

Doctor Tanya, exobiologist and theoretical particle physicist, studied her spiked poison ring that twinkled like a blizzard of gold. She designed a sunburst in reverse.

She suddenly remembered monitoring the reporter's, well, foreign correspondent's TV news show the last week of June. What incredible

wisdom did that young anchorman at large impart on the air waves that night? Tanya laughed. Her mind drifted to that particular broadcast.

Doctor Tanya suddenly realized in the broadcast on the air that her soul couldn't flush into the bay through her father's kidneys as he had told her at the age of nine. The reporter resembled a young photo of her own father.

She imagined what it would like to be on his boss's TV news program in an interview telling millions of midnight listeners round the world Dr. Tanya's own childhood secret: Doctor Tanya's father had announced to his daughter when she was nine years old, that he wished he had flushed her down the toilet with the condom if he could buy one, only it would stuff up the plumbing.

Unfortunately, a conception took place, Tanya surmised, and from that day on the doctor would be trouble. She was born a girl. He asked the midwife to check twice. Maybe there was a mistake. Maybe Tanya had been born a boy, after all. He had no such luck.

Tanya merged with the image of the reporter on TV at the moment. We're so much alike, she thought, and yet so different. She spat feverishly with foaming white-lined lips. Her career hacked away at her.

Her salary as a prominent scientist in her own nation was equal to what that TV reporter's secretary earned. The idea of unequal pay for equal work burned a hole right through Dr. Tanya. Would the reporter feel the same way? Tanya thought.

Tanya killed the foreign young woman who was about to assassinate the new leader of a new, Western Democratic regime in the Arab world. She tasted the joy of being a soldier of fortune. She wondered why she loved the feeling so much. After all, she bet the new leader would turn out to be one more historic dictator given time.

Her mind wandered to startling statistics. What am I passionate about? Tanya thought. How many other female soldiers of fortune could there be? The pay is more than a doctor could earn anywhere in Central Asia, Kurdistan, or in Russia. Travel and luxury hotels are always free. And research on tropical poisons are a life-long intellectual pursuit. It's good to be an exobiologist, Tanya believed. Her mind drifted to a future in Brazil.

She held the sleeping reporter's hand. Hers was leathery and calloused from use, and very strong, as if all her frustrated power found expression through her fingers. In contrast, his reporter's hands were soft and pink like those of an eternal boy. She looked down at him while he slept and visualized him dressed as Peter Pan or Robin Hood, in medieval tights. It made her laugh nervously.

She held the reporter's hand a bit tighter and thought of him as almost her double. The two personalities could easily merge—except for one crucial difference. She is woman, and he is man and at least twenty years younger than her.

He clowned. Tanya talked dead serious. Her cauterized heart had no room for play if adventure struck. Yet work for him had to be play and new surprises.

His passion is play. If it isn't fun, he wouldn't do it. The reporter took his play so seriously, Tanya imagined, that she saw him reading scholarly journals on the psychology of fun. That journal had been lying in his lap for reading on the plane. She stared at the magazine. If only she could play at her job. But her assignment took life seriously. His did not.

She smirked as she thought the reporter could be what her grandma in Kiev called a *выгода*, a *catch*—skilled, single, and smart. As a reporter with a foreign correspondent's staff job in television, he could be in demand for the next thirty years. He wouldn't be asked to get a face lift at forty-five as a woman TV reporter might be hinted at—to remove bags under the eyes. No, he would be given plenty of bags to carry abroad as a foreign correspondent. As a pathologist, she could hide behind the wrinkled mask of a respectable profession. There was such a shortage of princes in Kiev or Saint Petersburg or even her parent's land of exploration--Samarkand.

While he slept, Dr. Tanya mulled in her mind the way the reporter had told her upon first meeting that he had moved to Beverly Hills when his first wife mysteriously drowned on a separate vacation after a year of marriage. At twenty-five, he said he felt too young to have children. "After forty, I'd consider it, if I ever married again by that time," the reporter had said emphatically.

Dr. Tanya wondered whether in Beverly Hills, New York, or Atlanta, the reporter would find other TV local news princes of graviton waves or there, in Baghdad, other foreign news correspondents imbedded with troops or on secret missions or with contractors, or soldiers of other leaders' fortunes that challenged him. Finally, he failed at his toughest challenge: the ownership and control of his own career as a salaried reporter.

Tanya held the sleeping reporter's hand all through the long flight. She waited and listened, listened and waited. Her heart stretched a molecule at a time over a kettle drum probing for one shattering boom. Suddenly the old memories danced before her.

Once again, she was back in the villages outside Samarkand. She was sixteen years old. Tanya and her Eastern European parents moved from

being foreigners in Kurdistan eastwards to the dry mountains to escape the hunger. Snow glistened in the high deserts.

One day her Ukrainian father, with gleaming, cherry-black beard, pink cheeks, and eyes the color of tan potato skins, sneaked up behind Tanya's sister-in-law with an ax. As she hung clothes on the line, that ax thudded with fury on her head. When she turned in surprise, he caught her on the chin.

In a tiny village in Samarkand, surrounded by crystal lakes shaped like skulls, the bottomless lakes filled with monsters. Tanya saw her father's face in every man.

Her sister-in-law's blood trickled down the broken cobblestones and froze in tear-shaped droplets. Tanya watched the neighbors crawl down the winding streets to cover the sister-in-law with horse blankets.

Neighbors gawked at her father filled with elder rage, and Tanya filled with fear and shame. They pinned her father to a wooden bench. Tanya threw a scarf over the woman's face out of modesty and watched her leg twitch like a freshly slaughtered chicken.

Then the mother-in-law wielded a hammer and beat Tanya's father on the head to the drumming of one-and-uh, two-and-uh, one, two three. The village police took her father to a Samarkand prison.

The sister-in-law survived. For the rest of her life she fingered the scars of six stitches in her jaw and another six in the back of her head.

"Heads will roll," was Dr. Tanya's nana, *daddy's отец*, *father's* last words as they led him away. That night he died in prison of a stroke amidst the vomiting drunks, mostly foreigners and Russian workers, inside the same cell.

Six weeks later her mother shoplifted a dress from the main market place. A security guard tackled her. She died of fright on the way to prison. Tanya returned to Kurdistan and then to Moscow to study tropical poisons.

Outside her room, waves of snow lapped at the shores of her mountains. Wind-whipped sculpture stood below contemplating nature's dappling. Once Tanya sought scientific proof in the aristocracy of museums. Now she gazed on it in the simplicity of clay and the stone folk.

To be a paid mercenary, a soldier of fortune, in the armies of oil smugglers, battlefield robotics architects, and arms dealers pays a thinking woman what she deserves, Tanya reasoned.

At first her weapons were chemical. Tanya officially dealt in tropical poisons, herbs, and medicines for individual hits arranged by a coterie of selective governments and selected media. She picked up a copy of the reporter's first book and thumbed through the pages. *Confessions of a Foreign Correspondent*.

And what was Tanya's first book? Her empty diary...Instead, there were cans of unedited videotape stored in Moscow. She thought about Iraq and wondered whether her thinking was quintessential. Should she rely, instead on her life purpose of world peace? Maybe she made decisions too quickly, before all the information came in, Dr. Tanya thought.

Her mind drifted back to Baghdad. She wondered what the inside of an Iraqi brothel looked like--the sounds, smells, textures, colors and emotions. She imagined what the inside of an Egyptian prison was like, then a Guatemalan prison, a Brazilian brothel. She dozed off.

She daydreamed. Men chipped away at their old gods shielding themselves by the stomping of women's wombs. Golden fingers hammered golden notes into symbols to be worn around the throat so music could be frozen in time.

Men feared women's evil eye. The old curse was unfeeling. The family was more important than a woman's individual rights. Tanya remembered once asking her father the question 'why.' That was challenge enough to provoke him to beat her into pleasing him.

He tried to beat her into becoming a feeling woman. She continued to ask 'why' instead of pleasing him in silence. She remained a thinking woman. He died in prison.

When the divorce came, the children, house, car, and money would all go to the husband in Iraq. Without parents or siblings, a divorced woman went crazy. In Samarkand, one could always appeal to the Russians and other foreign workers, Tanya thought.

An angry spit exploded on the floor. The reporter stirred and stretched. He studied Tanya through glazed-over eyes. She tried everything--a tummy tuck, a breast implant, an eyelid lift. And she never even worked for a television network. Nor did she ever get asked by her employers to defer to men or to bleach her medium dark ash brown hair or to get cheek implants. No one told Dr. Tanya, "You look so old. Get those eyelid lifts like yesterday."

All at once Tanya's freedom became meaningless. A little trail of grape juice left her purplish lips.

"Hi, chief," the reporter whispered behind his spectacles, like a Clark Kent manikin as he stretched and yawned a vapor of fetid breath in her face.

"How do I look as a paid soldier of fortune?" She feverishly kicked the words. Tanya's throat clicked in tight knots.

The reporter rubbed his fingers along his face scars. "You didn't pay attention to a detail, Doctor, he said respectfully."

"What?"

"You know, doctor, you're getting a moustache," he told her.

Tanya glanced at him sharply, narrowing her black eyes to slits. "A lot of Mediterranean and Central Asian women have this problem. I'll call my electrologist when we get to Los Angeles."

"Doctor Tanya, it's more than a moustache. I hate to be the good friend who tells you, but you have one long, black hair on your chin. At your age, that's an estrogen imbalance."

"All right....That's enough. I'll check it out with my gynecologist."

"You're too old for the pill."

She whipped out a compact mirror and looked at it. In a moment, Tanya fished for a pair of tweezers in her make-up pouch and yanked out the hair.

"A news man notices every detail," he said.

"So do exobiologists, surgeons, and theoretical particle physicists. Did you know that many years ago that I had been accepted at MIT as a math and physics major, but never had been able to go there because of other nosey people's politics?"

She thought to herself: The men who came to strangle me were shrinking my world like the most delicately tinted of bubbles, shrinking in ever narrowing circles from the upward gush of my own infancy.

Tanya closed her eyes and leaned back lost in thought. The hum of the plane's engine soon lulled the loud-voiced reporter back into a restless sleep.

Why and how did I teach him to insult me? Tanya thought. Why did my body shrink inwardly instead of shoot out? Why did I relinquish power over myself to a television foreign correspondent with network news anchorman ambitions?

Chase me through dark cellars as a child. Catch me as a mistress with an ax coming down on my head. Within this body, within the wrinkling tissues that rock gently in my sea of misery is the source of a trillion lives.

Rock me quietly, nosey newsman, Tanya thought. "You extrovert filled with curiosity," she raged. Hold me in your arms. I'm the last born of an old cycle and the first born of the new.

I'm a thinking woman, Mister Foreign Correspondent. Metal shall become flesh, human become machine. You shall not drink more power from my body.

There was a taint of decay in him. In this spotty spin of fusion, I shall bury you, my controller, Tanya thought. Her mind swept past the small details to focus on how gravitons could be used as radio waves for communication beyond the universe's theoretical membrane barrier to talk with beings in other universes with different laws of physics.

The reporter awoke. He moved sluggishly and opened his *moth-wing-textured* ego to her. Tanya trembled in his arms as he held her through the plane's turbulence.

She strung out those last few days in Moscow with him, but he grew worse. The reporter began to change from a moth into a butterfly. His descent started from a once serious reporter to a tortured beast with multiple personalities. She wondered whether a tumor pressed on his right lobe.

He grew more violent, consuming her. At last they arrived back in Los Angeles. Once inside his new condo, his patterns grew familiar.

"You can't tolerate responsibility, can you?" Tanya chastised him.

The reporter barked. "Don't start treating me like my mother did. She's a man-hater. I can't stand her criticism."

"A man hater, eh? So that's what they call a feeling woman in America. My motto is never fall in love with a man who is angry at his own mother. We are so much alike we can only be arch enemies. Me and my angry father, and you and your angry mother...two peas in a pod. I bet your mother only wanted affection from her husband."

The reporter turned around, bent down, and shoved his butt in her face. "See any tail up there?" He taunted. "I'm a man, not an animal."

"My dog is loyal and protective. I feel safe with my wolf-dog," she stammered. "I don't feel safe around you."

The reporter's evolving into the boot in the face, fist in the stomach kind of daddy figure so described in Sylvia Plath's poetry, Tanya thought. I'm going to be happy to get rid of such a bad egg once I've cracked his macho shell, she pondered.

"You should see a neurologist, Mister Reporter. You had a seizure on the plane. Don't you remember?" Tanya begged him, but he ignored her.

"If something was growing on my brain, I'd have headaches."

"Don't you remember when you get violent?"

"Violent? Me? I'm a pussy cat on your work evaluation chart, doctor."

"What type of man's good for a thinking woman?"

Tanya asked the question 'why' again while she brushed her teeth the next morning.

If the reporter had been anything like her father, the wall would come up and cut her off in mid-sentence. The persistent reporter never cut her off. He listened. In fact, he rarely said anything at all.

"Why do so many men cut women off in mid-sentence? Why do they spread their knees so far apart in a plane or bus seat and unfold their arms across the top back of the seat to take up most of the room, while women crouch in a tiny space, knees together? Is it all done because a man is trying

to deny space to a woman and punish her because he thinks allowing seat space means she is trying to control him?" Tanya probed further. There was stony silence from the garrulous reporter's direction. He sat at the breakfast nook and laced his Reeboks.

In the days that followed, the network news foreign correspondent from Los Angeles and New York sat in silence. She had decided he kept his silence to drink more of Tanya's power. The reporter's patterns were growing. Tanya's world shrank to the threshold of the door. She wondered whether her fear had amplified because he came from an upscale family, a veterinary surgeon father who owned an animal hospital and hired other vets and an animal technician mother who shelled out tuition for prep schools.

Tanya thought about how her achievements had been judged on merit only, not family money. She compared her own dad's janitorial work with the reporter's surgical veterinarian father. Yet both met and worked together on the same '*brane*' of meritocracy.

That night she couldn't sleep. She listened attentively to an outrageous audio recording of the reporter's style. Yes, he's anchorman material, Tanya thought. His voice of resilience radiated confidence. His life is an open phone line. Mine is a shrinking agoraphobic world. Yet he's the one with hormone imbalances. She longed for his open phone line.

The reporter drank more of her power. Tanya only moved in with him the week before--when his latest female roommate tossed him out, right after he returned from overseas.

He tried to catch her in the act of thinking for herself. His body a sheet of light, a subtle electric fire, tried to peak hers. Tanya intellectually taunted him. Her 185 IQ over his 120 IQ. He extended his extroverted reporter's ego on metal legs closer to her introverted particle physicist and exobiologist's reflective panorama. Metal became flesh in a sea that was no longer the cold salty well of sanity she found soothing in the 1963 poems of Sylvia Plath. Two career professionals at their peak of work and buzz appeal in competition or *coopetition* could never be two equals in love, Tanya thought.

When the reporter had picked Doctor Tanya's mind clean and judged her unable to draw any more power from her words or deeds, he plugged into a new foreign correspondence assignment. In his newest assignment in the field, he glowed up in a burst of color. He flailed out on his own note. Inside, there was utter silence.

She remained year after year in her same career. He moved around the globe. Tanya's work life became all pulses of strong light and textures. Inside her were foreign nations of all the textures, moods, and music of the rainbow. But she called her rainbow the *drainbow*. Each area of color moved

and concentrated and throbbed for life. And every color was a nation that voted to be its own ruler. It was as if every cell in Tanya's body was a nation unto itself.

Only seven days together passed between them. The reporter told her to plan a quick, succinct dinner. Simplicity is what she made for dinner with a phone call to the caterer.

The reporter slurped his borscht and *Smetana* (*sour cream*). "You call this fun?"

"You can't stand to see me happy," Tanya whined. "Every time you come back from one of your soldier of fortune jags with a suitcase full of money, you turn into a beast." Tanya's eyes widened. "I thought you were a loyal foreign correspondent for that network news station."

"What should I do? Go back to Boston or Los Angeles, and teach bonehead English?"

The television reporter swung his arm across the table and sent the fruits flying to the carpet.

"You clean up this mess!" Tanya shouted a stream of epithets in Ukrainian and again in Russian. "This is why I left Kiev in the first place."

"Mess?" the reporter shouted. "What mess? I'll show you what a mess is, you mail-order whore." He picked up the food and dumped it on the Persian carpet. Then he opened the freezer and pushed out the contents and threw everything on the floor.

He shoved out the newly peeled apples, bobbing in water, and dumped them on the carpet. He lifted the milk, the tomatoes, the cold cuts--everything that the caterer's truck delivered, and threw them on the floor.

Tanya watched in torturous belief. She tried to analyze the man who only last month thought he would ask her to be his on-air expert in her physician and scientist's roles. But he only wanted a brief on-air interview.

He chose, instead, a young woman theoretical physicist from a prestige university to interview for a half-hour. Tanya memorized this reporter's style, but had to look up his personality style over cambric tea in an English language thesaurus.

That's when she mentally labeled him a take-away, charismatic man at home with every stranger, but a stranger at home who shunned responsibility unless it involved reporting the news from a unique location overseas."

She looked straight down his heart. She felt the shudder of shrinking caves of powerlessness beneath her feet. He would never grow up. And she wanted a man who could be responsible, slow to anger, and the potential father of her children, should she adopt them from orphanages where they remained in dark caves of critical thinking.

The reporter backhanded her, and Tanya jerked her head away almost robot-like in the direction of the slap. An ellipse of color formed on her cheek.

Gazing into the reporter's face was like looking into the glossy side of a toppling wave and seeing herself a failure. His square-jawed face extended so close to hers, she could smell the herpes-infected translucent membranes of his red-veined eyes.

In his pale eyes, Tanya saw herself as a child. For a split second she recalled her own mother telling her that she wrote in her diary on her honeymoon, 'today I died.'

"You're not supposed to hit me. It could kill the baby. The doctor said you're not..." Tanya controlled her emotions.

"You told the doctor I hit you? I don't give a rat's ass about your baby. It's certainly not mine. You and your high IQ sperm bank.... Where did you implant that frozen embryo, in London?"

"My doctor saw the purplish heel marks around my navel." Tanya stared at his feet.

"Those are reeking recoil marks from your automatic weapon." The reporter blasted. "Who are you? If you're so successful as a paid soldier of fortune and a world-renowned scientist, how come you went to a sperm bank and purchased number 1357911?"

"He's a popular donor. No genetic defects for nine generations back, a genius IQ, and a medical student."

"He donated sperm to more than 500 other women. What's going to happen when those kids grow up and marry one another without knowing they all had the same sperm donor for a dad? Why did you choose to get pregnant in the first place? You're probably only a few months away from menopause."

"The women all know one another online. There's this club..."

"How come you're willing to live here? And how come you told the doctor I hit you and then return here for more? You're free and single. You're a doctor. If you don't like our relationship, the door's open."

"You have some lethal obsession with me?" Tanya whispered.

"I'll never let either of you go alive."

"I know what you have in store for me if I tried to leave."

Tanya's head sunk back into the muscles of her neck. She felt a turbulence around the bend of an artery.

"Get rid of it. I want you unencumbered. You heard what I said. Or do I have to perform it on you myself?"

"No. I'll see you *promoted* first. Then you won't want me. You'll let me move on." Tanya sobbed. She asked herself in silence: Why do smart women like me who skipped two grades make such dumb choices in love? Tanya reasoned to herself, I won't sound angry. He'll calm down. Then I'll sneak out where he can't track me down again and hold me prisoner of his mind.

"Get rid of that child." He spat at her, mouthing the word, accusing her. The silent, infantile threat of her shadow overwhelmed him.

She thought for a moment. Thank goodness he never asked me to marry him.

While he mumbled under his breath, the TV news reporter slowly unbuckled his belt and slipped it off. He wrapped one end around the knuckles of his right hand several times. He began slapping the heavy buckle against his left thigh.

Slowly, he inched closer to her. "You old biddy! You forty-eight-year old discarded tissue!" His words ran together, rhyming each lash of the buckle across Tanya's face, giving birth to a terrifying cadence.

"You..."

Crunch.

"Told..."

Thud.

"Doctor"

Slap

"I hit..."

Like batman, elongated man, aquaman, spiderman, superman, captain marvel, the green hornet of his childhood fictions, the thuds, punches, groans, and oomphs rained on Tanya's petite body.

They both breathed as one, breathed the lint of hate. When he closed in, he finished his sentence by whipping his buckle across her cheek. The metal smashed across her teeth, and Tanya sang out with pain. She flailed, clawing his face with her talons.

She ran toward the door, and another blow stung her spine, almost paralyzing her. Tanya managed to creep across the room.

"Come here, you Slavic dominatrix," he slurred. "Mama, I'm going to train you to be a real, American doctor."

The reporter stood above her, swinging his belt, patiently stalking her. "Bubetchka! You're going to lose that baby! What's your real name, Tanya...It's Bubetchka Bratislava, isn't it...not Tanya? Why can't you tell me your real name? What secret are you trying to hide? I know your kind...moving around from government to government with your little poison

pin on the end of an umbrella waiting to pierce some innocent reporter's thigh when he's on an assignment. You're a scopolamine spy, a truth-serum tease. Aren't you the poised poisoner?"

Tanya screamed for help. Only silence echoed back. The reporter's face shimmered in a web of fluid. Tension linked them. Singing light flooded into his whole being.

He went for Doctor Tanya's little black bag and sorted through the unsterilized instruments. A flash of light glinted off the surgical vacuum extractor.

"This worked fine on my dad's dogs when I watched him practice veterinary spaying."

He unzipped her surgeon's bag and kned her in the small of her back. As she screamed and begged for help, he choked her until she passed out.

The reporter tried six instruments before he found the right surgical vacuum extractor to lose her six-week fetus. A cutting pain seared through her, bringing her into full consciousness. It was all over. As she looked up she saw the reporter bending over her, wiping her with a towel.

"How do you like a taste of your own medicine, doctor?"

She screamed, crawled across the carpet, and doubled over. A spike of adrenalin surged through the pain and dulled it.

When it was over, the reporter's pulsing patterns rose and slid like colored lights. He couldn't be human, she thought. Inside had to be an electric grid that made him run. Then she realized that the reporter could *only* be human. Or a type of space alien that thought of humans as fuel. She'd be better off with a robot working partner programmed only to do no harm, Tanya thought.

The media man was human, all right... too human. He took her pulse before he opened the door. She ran out into the hall of the high rise Los Angeles condominium half-naked, but he threw the bloody towel in her face, and then her purse, and finally her dress and shoes.

He followed her into the dark, empty hallway. "Make sure you see your gynecologist now. If you complain, I'll say you did this to yourself. You're the doctor. I'm just a reporter of news, an observer. I wouldn't want you to have any malpractice suits. Don't worry. Your own patients never complain. Why should they? They're all dead."

"Stay away from me," she screamed. Tanya ran blindly and bumped into the wall. He handed her the dress, shoes and purse over the towel. The reporter held open the stairwell door for her.

I must stay calm, she thought as she stumbled down the steps. At the top of the stairs, the reporter's staccato bass voice echoed down the dark stairwell. "You'll be back a tougher soldier than ever, Doctor Tanya."

"Only for cold revenge," Tanya thought as she disappeared into the street and looked back at his window. She visualized the reporter as a man of tautology, on television consistently using needless repetition of the same idea in different words.

Dr. Tanya saw him descend into a beast pacing inside his kitchen window as he poured drinks. She could even hear him from the pavement below loudly reporting to himself, talking to Tanya as if she were still in the room. "You're a thinking woman, a mean and lean man-eating machine. And machines don't break, people do. You'll be back for more. You'll always be a mom to me. Take two aliens in the morning, Tanya, and call a robot."

A moment later, she hailed a taxi and sped to the hospital, her cover, where she worked that season. "Why do driven women like me make dumb choices in men?" Tanya nervously barked a compelling tattoo at the cab driver as she handed him the fare and tip. He shrugged. "I probably let the sword decide, as the proverb asserts," Doctor Tanya prattled powerfully.

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5. Folklore of Wisdom

The North Caucasus Mountains, 1942

"A Tatar has to be wise, or else how would you have conquered Byzantium and Rome with all her book learning?" said the Mars-wracked Nazi general. "You have the tales of *Dede Korkut* and the *Epic of Köroğlu*. We are not looking for sons of Allah, neither the Adyge nor the Tatar... not yet at this time," he said with a knowing smile. The general nervously snapped his fingers.

We Caucasus Mountaineers hid, but tracked the Nazis going from village to village, that were fanning the hate of private feuds, widening the breach between the two hostile religious sects of Islam, we learned from the speakers of the Adyge language among us. Their North Caucasus language hadn't changed that much from our different Tatar folklore of the Altai in this hidden place so high in the mountains.

We heard what sounded like the language of the Russians coming in from the front, chasing the speakers of the Germanic dialects from the

mountains of the Kafkas, and the Moslem tribes were marching against them. We hid in the empty, burned out huts of the Mountaineer tribes.

"Von Liebnitz," someone shouted the name of one of the Germanic commanders whom we learned was from Bavaria. Our mountaineer friends translated, as we heard their language had not changed enough to lose all understanding in this new time into which we were hurled.

"Send this request to Arslan, khan of the Kasi-Kamucks, in whose territory was Jarash that he should seize upon the person of the Mollah."

Then the Mountain Men translated that "Arslan, afraid to lay his hands upon a teacher so holy to the people, took the Mollah to the adjacent city of Avaria."

So that's where we were, near Avaria. The word went out across the birch trees and into all the small wooden homes: "Believers forget your sectarian differences. Members of different tribes, mountain men of every warring tribe, Tatars, join together and lay aside your animosities. All lovers of your country rise in arms and drive back the dogs who had dared invade the sanctity of the mountains."

The Bavarian General frothed at the mouth, glad the crowd undertook the Cherkessk dialect. Our leader, Atokay walked right in like he had been living here in these times. "No mountaineer shall ever be a slave!" The word went out. But how many of their women had been sold into slavery by the warring tribes on different sides? But they were a new faith now.

"The first law of our prophet is the law of freedom. No Moslem shall be a slave." The word went out. Hmm. Something to ponder. But we Persian Jews living in the Caucasus Mountains have been here since 700 years before the Common Era. The Mountain Men also are people of the book. Their cheers rose all night. Now, where do we stand? I don't see the difference between peoples.

Our Mountaineer friends led us into the homes of other Mountain Men, and we Judaic Persians of these Caucasus Mountains blended in with the rest of the mountain people of the Kafkas. They hid us well and didn't ask where we came from, only warned us that there was a war.

Yes, we had the good fortune to have papers saying we were Tatars. We had been given these papers by a few Tatars who saved us. And luckily Our Persian, Tat, and Turkic dialects, they didn't understand, but the different North Kafkas speech of the leader of the Caucasus Mountaineers who also saved us named Atokay was still barely distinguishable, and they might have thought we had come out of Central Asia or somewhere by the Caspian, that ancient Sea of Meotis far away and had joined to help them.

For the moment we kept our mouths shut and let them care for us until we could find our way back to the cave and get back to the glory of our own times and the orchards of our own Khazaria. The Ciracassians had a leader they called Murat. He came home from his long ride to Jarash and greeted us as fellow mountaineers, obviously in hiding from the men in the big metal elephants.

Our clothes had not changed much, with the exception of the chain maile and helmets that were stared down and laughed at until we removed them—or at least the men. “Actors,” Atokay smiled in his dialect. “Theatre of the mountain men,” he nodded.

The silence became unnatural. It was a silence that swallowed all sound and smothered it, a silence vibrating like a drum skin. Atokay stared at his bare feet and slowly moved the toes. They looked uncanny, as though his feet led a life of their own. He felt the fur of his blanket and the pressure of a servant girl’s hand under his neck.

“You’re a mountain man, and we are all going to be liquidated,” Murat warned Atokay and our Kagan, who still pretended to be a man from the Caucasus.

Where was the “physical liquidation” to take place? Murat pointed out of the window to a Germanic commander a few feet away. Look what we walked into in another time. Murat called them Germans and reminded us that in 1942 the Germans were here in the Caucasus, and we would be liquidated.

“Why?”

“Ask him,” Murat laughed. “Smell the leather of Von Liebnitz’s revolver belt and listen to the crackling of his uniform.”

“What’s a revolver?” All of us asked at the same time. Father smelled the pork stink on the breath of the German soldiers. What did will he say to his victims?

We decided to be survivors. “The Russians are coming.” Murat added.

“Rus? Is that who you mean?”

How would the Russians look? Would they call us ancient Khazar enemies when they came?

Murat, Atokay, and the Kagan all looked at their fingers. It was so quiet that we heard the crackling of the burning embers in the small fire pit.

“Do you feel ill, Murat?” His wife, Tanya’s quivering whispers broke the silence with a shock.

All Murat’s muscles contracted at once. Fear was beginning to seep into the hero. He blinked at her.

"Please, some water?" A Caucasus Mountains woman sat up and extended her hand praying to receive a tender touch. But he just stared blankly out of the window watching the war pass by. War drew his soul into the mountain.

I watched my father, in hiding, posing as a Tatar as Murat, another Mountaineer leader made his speech in front of the gathering tribes. Then I wandered about the small cabin waiting for dawn, waiting until those around me woke for prayers.

Someone motioned to Raziet the little Adyge girl in my care. She helped the older men take down the red-gold and green-blue prayer rugs and brushed them clean, laying them down facing east. The women had washed and stood still, listening to the silence between the white-washed walls.

The rain had stopped as suddenly as it began, and the new silence hit all of us as a new color. The dawn had now come to meet me from the deep well of sanity. Gradually the people of Himri had to take refuge behind the village's triple walls. During the retreat, the warriors who had been compelled to fight with the Germans gradually fell off, one by one Murat told Atokay.

Their chieftain's deserted them as they saw the superiority of the forces of the enemy. Even the principal Murid, Hamid Bey we were told was deceived, by forged proclamations issued in the name of the prophet separated himself from a leader whose fortunes were on the wane.

And when October's fallen leaves were still covering the hills of Himri, the Russian bayonets arrived to add their gleam to the tired mood of autumn, brown leaves choking a stream. We marked the cave in the Kafkas. How, oh, how were we going to go back through that opening in the dark rock?

How are we to go back to our own times? Back to a time when Khazaria was at peace and was in the midst of that excitement and joy of just having turned Jewish, and dancing and song were everywhere?

"The Mountaineer dream will be rolling up *aoul* (village) Himri behind the roll of drums," I whispered before I began to pray.

"One bullet will be mightier than a million forced votes when freedom is gunned down," said Murat.

"What's a bullet?" I joked. Is it like a pullet? The crowd of men showed us how time had changed, but everything remained the same.

"Would you rather be paid in a handful of flour or in knowledge?" Murat asked their leader, Atokay, who translated for my father.

"Our mountains are being used as a shield," Murat said sharply.

The story passed along to me was that The Russians are at war with the Mountain Men, the peoples of the Kafkas, but the Mountain Men only go to war with their own rulers.

So nothing has changed the mighty mountains. Why did the people even come here eons ago from the Middle East?

"You have to rise above the law," Murat announced.

"No, you have to bring love and peace to all these people," my father said.

"How, by joining hands in death so others may live?

"No way," I insisted.

My mother's large green eyes widened. She began to speak and Atokay translated the North Kafkas dialect that hadn't changed much in a thousand years.

The Russians were holding their chief men as hostages in Andrejewa. Atokay watched Murat smoke his chibbuk, a Mountaineer pipe.

"Bide your time," my father put his word in through the translator. "Are you so child-like as to believe that invaders from one land or time are any better than invaders from another?"

In Avaria was an Amazon-like woman who called herself a "Khatun" and re-named herself Pashu Bikay, a direct descendant of the she-khan who ruled in the winter of 1830. Pashu Bikay approached us and unveiled herself before the circle.

She cried out, "Go home you who came from Chunsash, and tie your rifles to your wives' corsets."

Amazingly, the men followed Pashu as their leader just as the Pashu who came before her. The crowd of men told me that eight thousand men followed this female, Pashu.

In the morning, a Nazi general, Von Liebnetz appeared, and I was told through the translator what this so-called second world war was all about. Oh, no, not in the midst of another war! I want to go home, back to the peace of my mountains. The streets of Tarku were all torn up by war.

Gradually, each resident of Himri had to take refuge behind the villages' triple walls. So we were still in Himri, in the place of our summer home far from Atil, but thrown a thousand years into a future not our own and not by choice. I had to find out why. That's why the time-travels of the Silk Road continue.

Our hosts briefed us on what artillery was and the weapons of modern warfare, and I'd rather dance with the Bulgars than be here. And when the fallen leaves covered Himri, the Rus arrived to add their gleam to the mood of the end of summer.

Artillery soon brought down the towers of loose stones over the devoted heads. By that time, all of us found a common language, classical Arabic. We all spoke it, since the days when the great rabbis of Baghdad

went forth into Persia with their Torah scrolls, and from Persia on Purim, came to the high Caucasus mountains. When we wrote in Hebrew, we also had to translate from the Arabic for the scholars and rabbis from Toledo, so we learned many languages. And our houses of worship were built facing south as we had built them in Persia.

Pachu Bikay met the Queen of the Steppes, but Pachu still wanted to take up arms against the Rus like the Khatun had a thousand years before. "I was born laughing," Pachu said through the translator. I watched as her face marred by the pox caught the rain in small pockets that glistened in the sun when the rain stopped. Our rainbow Kaganate also glistened. She lived by the art of war. We Mountaineers vowed now to live by the art of Hebrew script, even if it meant learning four host languages and cultures.

I sensed a lack of unity among these tribes. We followed the men as they rode from aoul to aoul calling upon warriors to follow them. Each looked for a hero to lead him. The tribes of the Eastern and Western Kafkas seemed to be different. They sang the praises of heroes. My father told them to sing a little less and make more charts, but the chorus of voices sang louder and without ending.

Everyone still rode horses over a narrow, rugged path that wined over the mountains picking its way along the rocky bed of the torrent. Our horses dived into forests tangled with brambles. The horse of a Khazar or a Mountaineer is conscious that it is going to meet armed men.

#

We came out of the past and met men living in our past, men on horseback with no big elephants, or tanks as they told us, in an age of tanks. Each warrior dressed as if time had not passed, wearing their shaggy *bourkas* that covered the entire rider and the back of his steed.

We had arrows, but they had what they said were "rifles." And the barrels of their rifles protruded from their long *bourkas*. Below dangled the horse-tails braided with bullets, just like the steppe warriors who carried their arrow heads that way. So nothing really changes in the mountains or in the steppes like it would have if we were at the crossroads of the world. We are not. Those of the steppes soon take to the eagle's nests.

We stopped for the night. Murat seized his son and rode on a raid. He lived by the art of war. We lived by the book. I sensed these tribes needed a hero, but fast. What they had was the running fire of the guerilla as a power game.

Murat's son, Lam, rode from *aoul* to *aoul* calling upon warriors to follow him. We rode with the villagers to a spot chosen to hold an assembly—in a vale shaded by trees.

Instead of making war charts, they sang praises of heroes. Murat determined his plans by a chorus of voices. A moonless sky paraded before us as we sprang into saddles of sheep's wool.

A narrow, rugged path winded over the mountains picking its way along the rocky bed of the torrent. Stopping to rest, the greenish tea passed before our noses. Murat cooked better than Taklamakan and prepared hot *burghoul* wheat and barley cakes with a savory pilaf of minced mutton. I poured honey over dried fruits.

The war would have to stop when it was time for cooking. Mountain men passed bowls of *skhone*, or mead with a little seasoned sour milk and a few honey and millet cakes. Everyone shared the food as they shared life.

Murat's son was silent, and so was my brother. They were both boys of the same age, that special ritual of transition that began in the future when a child turned thirteen and became responsible... when you dress as a warrior, but are still a little boy with a big job to save your family and your homeland while learning great wisdom.

The food eaten, every man took to cleaning his weapons while uttering a short prayer for protection. No speaking to one another. The sentinels were set. Each man knew that if he fell down in battle, he would only be a sleeping baby, the sky his crib's curtain.

I cut branches for them and covered the branches with mats and felts. It began to rain. And a wind rose up. The boughs furnished us a place to nap. The men couldn't sleep well. They kept the watch fire burning out of the rain. Fires lighted up the whole mountainside making the granite glow with eerie colors.

Rocks snuggled against one another. The radiance warmed our faces. The enemy's fire, still the same old enemy, diffused a glow. Where were we now? The Kuban River still flowed as it had in my time. Whoever made the war, set fire to the reeds on the Kuban and Terek rivers meant to destroy the huts of our mountaineers. Shadows threw a dull red tint on the horizon.

There's the moon, a thin line of silver, rippling the blackness, outlining the sides of tanks hidden in a dark forest. "Never take an enemy's life in cold blood," Murat whispered to my brother. He did not answer, but moved to kiss my father's hand, touching it to his forehead, and kissing it again before letting the Kagan's strong hand drop slowly to his side.

The Mountaineer's leader looked us over. "If you do not fear, there is nothing that can harm you. The horse's head will be turned toward the mountains."

Murat's son paced back and forth. "You tell me what tanks do?"

My father answered them all, a stranger in a strange land. "The Creator of all of us must help your enemies. We can do without outside help when it comes to fighting the enemy of our brothers in the mountains."

"Ah, but we have outside help," Murat grinned.

"Might they be the Russian hirelings? The free men of the mountain have spies along the border. Everywhere there are souls which can be bought for gold."

"War is not hell, son," Murat told his boy. "It's a poet's paradise, a theater that fertilizes the crops."

"It is too, hell," I responded quickly.

"I'd rather be listening to the music of my water wheels."

"A poet fights better because he has read or written the romance of war," Murat said.

"Romance?" My father laughed.

"Yes," said the Mountaineer leader. "Our enemies, like the Roman legions cut off in the woods of Germany, will be left with no one to bury them. Each foreigner who comes in here to make war thinks more of his hut in his own land. Then one of us, unable to rest, rides down from the mountains and hides for a day in the reeds of the Kuban River."

Murat's son continued the vision, "We creep at night like a wolf from his lair. We glide unseen by the guard post of the enemy as the war-makers take their final pull on a vodka bottle. We crawl up within sight of him, and pick him off."

"And who is this enemy you speak of?" My father asked.

"Those whose goals are not to repair the world with charity," I said.

"Where have you been? Don't you know there's a World War on?"

"You are not thinking real," said my father.

"You'll all perish. I haven't received any invitation to a war."

"You're in it now," Murat scowled.

We were all in this together, people from different times and different lands. Here and there small parties appeared in the distance. The method of warfare up here in the mountains hadn't changed since my times.

The men rolled stones on the heads of the enemy below the same as they probably did twenty thousand years before. At Gogatel, a small fort situated south of the Andian range that runs parallel with the Andian branch of the Koissu, Murat and Atokay joined a tribe of mountain men.

Now, we all pitched in like two ends of one candle. We helped those around us to establish a depot of such provisions and munitions of war. This place, I'm told is a single day's journey from Dargo. Muslim and Jew worked

side by side for a free Caucasus, a hidden place where each cave became a womb of great critical thinking.

The soldiers, lightly laden, set off at dawn full of cheer and energy. Before they tired, the men had crossed the pass of Retchel into the beech woods of Itchkeria. I am the only teenage female in this pack of wolves, dear diary. And then the fight began.

Hostile tribes of the region were up in arms and waiting for the enemy. The woods are deep here. As Murat's vanguard reached the first narrow ledge, a murderous fire from behind broke loose from behind the trunks of a thousand trees.

Lost in time. Lost in the woods. We scattered, not knowing what monstrous machines these men of the future had. Again, in the Kafkas, the more things changed, the more they didn't.

The mountain men fell across the path, serving as a shield for one party and obstacles to their enemy. They never explained who the enemy was, but they were fighting the Rus or what they later told us were the Russians on one side and the Germans on the other and also other enemies of the tribes of the Kafkas.

We had barricades—natural vines and flower creepers. The paths were narrow and steep like in our summer palace away from the river flies. The winding path made the march so difficult that both us and whomever the enemy happened to be at the moment, none of us could march more than a few steps in a day.

Why were we fighting people we had never met? They told us about the war against the Jews and their war for a free Kafkas and the world war, and it all rang together like a giant gold bell.

Fighting went on into the night. Murat brought us close to Dargo. Flames and fire consumed this aoul, and the burning lighted up our path. Murat had set on fire every bit of wood, straw, and grain that could not be taken away. He left the enemy only the blackened stone walls of the mud houses.

"So you want to be a mountain man, eh?" I said to my brother, Marót. Our Mountaineer friends cooked their meals on the bivouac fires. We slept under the open sky. The next day more fighting came to us on wild horses.

Murat had found a force of six thousand warriors of the Kafkas to anonymously join up with this village called an *aoul*. The warriors opened fire on the Russians who were supposed to save the mountain men from Teutonic lands. We finally learned the name of those on each side.

An arrow wasn't good enough, or a stone. We had to learn the guns. And the guns consumed too much ammunition to be fired with any rapid

movement. When the mountaineers took the weapons, they could not operate the Russian equipment they had taken. Someone took Dargo, but it wasn't Murat.

"In Medieval times," it has been said, 'when the Jews of Eastern Europe had no hope other than the grace of the Almighty, the coming of the *Meshiach* (Messiah), or the arrival of the Khazari,' guess who showed up on white steeds carrying wolf and horse tamgas and silver standards? The Khazari, the Kosarin... . They alone saved the battle for those we defended," said my father.

"Things don't get any better for us."

"It will," my father answered. "We have a specific life purpose—the repair what's broken in the world."

The Russians sent half of their force back to Gogatel to grab a supply of provisions. They had to push through the woods to regain their line by the north route. This move on Gogatel gave our brothers, the mountaineers another chance at their enemies. But who were our enemies—those who were now called the Russians or the Germans?

"You're Jews. What do you think?" Murat assured us.

"And we're also Mountaineers for nearly three thousand years, I answered. "And what do you think?"

"We certainly remember tales of the Mountain Jews from Azerbaijan and Persia." Murat nodded. "But we learned of them through books written by the Russians."

The mountain men speaking thirty-four different languages of the North Caucasus had given themselves no rest. Not satisfied with the slow work of the rifle, they now rushed in on the battalion tanks with only knives and expected to fight hand to hand. I still had to learn all about tanks and rifles, but with Murat at their head and strengthened by reinforcements, they attacked the escort party both going and returning.

Rain made the battle muddier. Along came a general named Klucke. He was a German deserter who still fought the Russians in vain. Now he asked to join the Mountain Men. When he arrived at Dargo, he had left thirteen hundred of his men, together with two captured Russian generals behind in the woods.

Three hundred mules with packs and wagons overflowing with grain stood next to cannons. And the mules and wagons fell into the hands of the Russians as all of us watched still hidden deep in the woods.

Soldiers were put on half rations as they called their nomadic meals, and the horses at the grass. Through the valley of the Aksai, a battle left

scars on the earth. Murat's mountain men fought the battalions step by step as they retreated. Wherever the mountain of pain stood forth to the banks of the Aksai, only a narrow passage was left for their troops. Barricades blocked the way.

The mountain men took aim from behind the rocks and the beech trees as they brought down so many that the Russians took to their tanks. Murat sent for reinforcements so his men wouldn't fall into enemy hands. Fortunately for the mountain men, a band of our friends, the Tatars carried messages to the fortress of Girsel.

The Tatars got through the barricades and brought the news of what was happening to the Mountain Men. Then three thousand infantry and three hundred Cossacks under a German named Freitag ran to their relief. The joy of the famished battalions could be painted in a portrait.

So nothing has really changed except the shape of the metal and the reach of the weapons. We still didn't know who we were fighting and for what. All we knew is that there is a war against the Jews and the Nazis wouldn't want us to survive. And when the Russians found out we were Caucasus Mountaineers, they, too would be the enemy of the Mountain people.

Everyone thought the impenetrable mountains would stop the columns of soldiers. If it didn't stop the mountaineers with arrows, why would it stop anyone else with elephant tanks?

What were we doing here, trying to liberate Kabarda? The fall of Dargo was a gray tedium that went through everyone, regardless of his tribe. These are the mountains. The Kabardas, great and small, lie on the northern side of the Kafkas range halfway between the two seas, northwest of the Lesghi and Chechen highlands.

If only there wasn't war. The green valleys, the broken, dappled mountains would undulate in the center like Khadife velvet on a Altai horse. Army after army crawled out of the north, fresh from the tomb of men, and inexhaustible. Bulwarks circled the free homes of the highlanders. The Pagan days seemed to live on, even though the mountaineers are Moslem now.

Yet these mountains are as tree-spirit worshipping as the ghosts that live in the rocks and the witches who live in the trees. So we were in the Mountaineer Militia now. A bunch of Mizrahi Mountain Jews speaking Tat and Judeo-Persian, Azeri and the languages of the North Caucasus. We were now imbedded with friends in the middle of a Moslem militia.

We were drafted to be among the warriors, the hot young bloods who simply liked to fight. Every man wanted to throw off his yoke. Independence was the word now as in our homeland and time. Finally, Murat

had sent his zealous partisan, Ibrahim to lead an armed force that hoped to compel the Kabardians to take sides with him. Was there no other choice than war or to be a zealot?

Fearing the Russian tanks and the German tanks, the Kabardians preferred to stay neutral. No matter how much Murat asked them to riot against the Russians, they preferred to perfume their beards. Then the deportations started. Many of the mountain men were marched village by village to the deserts of Kazakhstan. Murat made a speech, "The enemy has conquered Cherkei and taken Akhulgo, and murdered the women of Avaria.

When lightning strikes one tree, does every other tree in the forest bow down to the storm and cast itself down should the lightning also strike them?" My brother watched Murat closely. The speech went on in front of the Kabardians.

"You think for a moment they think of you as Russians? Is not your passports stamped 'Tatar' or stamped with your religion?"

"Words won't work any longer. Now deeds will."

Everybody likes the idea of fighting for your faith, but there are so many types of faith, and just who is the enemy? No, this war thing won't due at all. I watched Murat walk away to his quarters.

On a pole a breeze trembled through a proclamation sign put up by the Russians. My Mountaineer friend translated and told me it read, "The commotions and bloodshed that have taken place among the Caucasian Mountaineers have attracted the most serious attention of Stalin."

Now who in the world is Stalin? Sounds like the name of a type of horse. Stalin the stallion. I had to find out. Troops already had arrived. I sensed a lot of people in this insane war had lost hope. We say when you lose hope you lose all fear.

What's good about that? I met a young lady my age that was from one of the Mountaineer tribes, the Adyge. She began to teach me her language and I followed her through these neutral fields of Kabardia. Her name is Raziet. We had run out of time in this place.

"Let's ride in the apple truck," Raziet motioned to me with hand signs and her words that I quickly learned. "In this year your destiny will be decided," she told me.

I decided everyone around me was no match for a war of this size. "My father has a plan for raising a troop for the crossing of the Kuban," Raziet explained.

"Sheik Mansour from the Eastern Kafkas will give my father three thousand men."

"I still don't know who you are fighting. Is it the whole world against the Kafkas? I thought this was the war against the Jews."

"And everyone else," she told me. I began to understand her language.

"Raziet, my friend. Are you talking three thousand men against the whole Russia? Or is it Germany you're fighting now?"

Nothing was clear to me anymore. Not only had I to deal with a time leap, but now sizing up who was fighting who and for what kind of freedom and independence. All I saw were messengers riding from one end of the mountains to the other.

And they were using the same horses we used, and it seemed everyone else was riding in those big tanks. I looked around. Peaceful highlands to my right and left. All I saw were the blossoms.

A steed cropped the first tender blades in the vale. A Lesghi sat listless at the door of his sakli basking without a thought of war. He watched the wooden beams of his home. The birds chirped, and I saw a turtle moving slowly in peace, half-asleep.

Then came the shouting. "Drag him down. He is the alien. He will kill us all by pulling us into a useless fight against an unseen enemy. Pull him down with ropes."

All of the men of Himri, Akhulgo, and Dargo, the riders of Arrakan and Gumbet, Avaria and Koissubui, Itchkeria, and Salatan, the people of the four branches of the Koissu, the bloodstained banks of the Aksai—all of them gathered here.

Lesghi, Chechens, warriors of Dagestan. Tribes of mixed Khazar and mountain origin, freemen all, speaking a basket of dialects sat in stirrups when they couldn't find jeeps. Guns and rifles rode at their side where medieval arrows had gone before them.

Their leather bags were filled with cracked wheat. Few could afford what they showed me were called "cars." "Pull him down," the men shouted at Murat. No one had to pull him. He stepped down to meet the crowd who cheered.

Raziet and I, like stick figures, were pushed into the crowd. I found out the men here were Sufis. Murat explained to father and me when I brought Raziet home to take a meal with us. She explained with translators through two different dialects so we could barely understand the words sent from Turkic to Adyge, a language of the North Kafkas. I also spoke the Kievan dialect and some of the languages of the mountain people we lived with in the summer from my own time.

"Our enemy is common," Raziet told us.

"Don't tell me you still have the same enemy over all these years? Why do people have to have enemies?" I asked her. I'm not sure she understood where we belonged and when.

You'd be surprised at how many different faiths have leaders who say they hold direct communication with heaven, seeing their prophet, leader, or savior in the form of a dove who gives divine commands. Of all the places I traveled to and in all the times, almost everyone from everywhere sees a dove and gets divine commands from that dove. I wonder why and what that means...and why a dove? Does it mean freedom to everyone all over the world? Or does it mean peace?

Freedom and peace should be the same, but you rarely see one without the other. Some force cramped the mountaineers. The state was spreading like plague. "We go home and wait to die because your leader thinks the Mountaineer mode of warfare is not good enough for him now," said one man at our table.

"Fighting is useless without tanks," said one warrior.

I stared out of the window watching horses clopping down the stone streets of the *aoul*. The streets were almost empty. Rain washed bits of colored paper from an empty market place. Flies buzzed in the sun, and doors remained bolted waiting for some word.

They showed me what a radio was, but all I heard was a blank noise. In the distance, the boom echoed across the hills. Fire and smoke and the sound of war closed in.

Therefore, the more things change, the more they change back to what they were in the first place. "What will happen to us?" I asked my new friend, the lady, Raziet.

Outside a dear friend, a Sufi Imam preached from a goat stand. "My words came to pass." Inside this cabin, small tablets were placed around the room inscribed with verses.

Raziet explained it wouldn't be proper for a man to question his wife. Great wooden pegs and tables filled the women's rooms where they knitted their silver lace in an obscurity illumined by scanty rays of sunlight from an opening in the roof.

Raziet and her mother showed me where they live, in their own set of rooms. The walls of the women's quarters were hung with dresses and fabric, not with weapons. Yet perhaps clothes also are passive weapons.

In the corners were large boxes filled with the bedding for her house. Strung on lines across the room were embroidered napkins, scarves, silk bodices glittering with gold threads and silver flowers. The shelves were filled

with copper and brass, china and glass ware, pottery, and the wooden bowls and spoons used for eating. Raziet showed me her loom.

I was offered a pottage of millet. Raziet drank from leather bottles filled with sour milk and honey and some barley. I ate the wheat loaf with honey and wild thyme. Outside was a shaggy steed. I walked the Kalmyk Mongolian women that tinted their hair red with henna. We went with these women to their hut half buried in the sand on the shore.

A boy ran to meet us with a falcon on his wrist. Then we saw him—the Bavarian, General Neid. The women told us through a translator, but we understood the Tatar women that lived near the Cherkessk peoples.

I learned new words—that the Nazis were all over the mountains. Who are the Nazis? Oh, yes. Murat told me what had happened. Then he told me about the soldiers who deserted their Nazi ranks and were hiding and creeping in the mountains. All over the mountains the men searched for deserters from the Nazi ranks.

“He was sent into the Kafkas to carry out a system of defense and conquest,” they warned me. Raziet pointed to the older Tatar woman. “Murat uses German and Polish deserters to make Dargo their headquarters.

He collects stores of ammunition and provisions.”

“What side is that man on?” I asked.

“We can’t be too sure.” The Tatar woman grinned. “He uses the zeal of the tribes all over this part of the Kafkas. He’s defensive. Watch out, but he isn’t making any progress in stepping on us highlanders. He’s been here two years, and is losing ground.”

“How do you know all this?”

The Tatar woman laughed. “I listen to the men talk. I sleep with one eye open. The men around here say he has the power of life and death over the mountain people. He’ll put anyone he wants on trial for offences, and he appoints the civil workers. Someone hired him to put down us few rude tribes in the mountains. We women of the mountains marry young.”

“Who hired him?” I looked at the women. “Don’t tell me you mountain men are still battling the Russians for independence after more than a thousand years. What did you expect—the Nazis to set you free? What about us steppe and mountain Jews? Whose side are you on anyway, my friends?”

“Nothing short of the capture of Dargo would kick the Germans out and restore Russian rule of the twelve tribes of the Caucasus Mountains.” The Tatar whispered to me.

“Is that what you want, more Russian rule over your people?”

“We want independence,” the Tatar shouted.

"Here, have a bite of this cake." She shoved her honey cakes in my mouth to shut me up. It was toasty and sweet.

I studied Neid's face from a few paces away later that day. The blackness beneath his eyes told me he wasn't eating well. What I didn't know wouldn't harm me, yet.

Murat left his meal with the mountaineer men and my father and went to see the Tatar woman's men folk.

"I have a plan," he told his followers at the Tatar's place. "With a force of ten thousand infantry and a few hundred Cossacks, I'll set out for Dargo, taking the northern track, the route by the river Koissu and through the district of Andi."

The Tatar males agreed. "The mountaineers will watch all the enemies."

"Only small parties are to show themselves. The villages will be left without police indefinitely."

Women were afraid they'd be molded by grief, but suddenly the latest infantry rifles came into the hands of the mountaineers. Their world was smelted together into a unity for an undetermined goal. If one mountaineer fed the enemy a spoon of yogurt, the Russians would take their revenge on the Sufi Mountain Men. Nazis had just exterminated thousands of Russians on the front, and they were ready for revenge on any mountaineer who thought for one instant that the Nazis would promise the mountaineers a homeland free from the Russians.

Enemies boxed in the hills from all sides. Neid, the German general who had run away from his Nazi army walked into the house of the Tatars. "You work in a factory?" He asked the woman's old husband.

"I'm a machinist," said the Tatar.

"That's the myth of the happy worker," the deserter grinned.

"And what about you?" He looked right through me.

"I'm getting married." I didn't know what else to say.

"So? If you're not in school, then you belong in the factory."

What could I say, that I'm Jewish living among the friendly Sufi? Luckily, the Tatar man spoke up. "From whom do you get your soldier's pay?"

"What?" Neid said sharply.

"We don't depend on the fifth of the booty taken from the enemy or the fines imposed for violations of the *shariat*."

The Tatar moved closer to Neid. "We have a system of taxation. A poll tax to the amount of the ruble is levied on every family. One tenth of the produce of the land goes into the public treasury. If you die without heirs,

your money goes to the government. And wealth is accumulated in the mosques.

"The Sufi dervishes living on voluntary contributions have been absorbed into our army or driven out of the land. Our general lives as simply as we do. The Imam is rich and deposits money in secret places in the woods of Ani and Itchkeria—great treasures of gold, diamonds, and other valuables."

As Neid scrambled to his feet the Tatar man laughed. He looked at me or through me as if I were invisible, assuming from my gaudy Khazar clothing, straight brown hair, and high cheekbones that I was a Tatar.

"Riches are a strong ally," Neid grumbled.

"But simple living makes us outlast you." The Tatar walked around him. "We number only a million and a half, maybe less now. The Russians are returning to the front by way of Transcaucasia and Cis. Better watch out, General Neid."

"Large expenditure for such a small result," the General said.

"Where do you stand? I know you're a deserter, but what side are you really on, or did they plant you here?"

"They?"

"Someone set you up in the mountains. I don't believe you're hiding out here."

"This damned Kismet of yours," Neid scowled.

"You see us through foreign eyes," the Tatar man added. "I heard there's a wedding."

"No wedding in wartime," Raziet said.

"Then what?" Neid paced the floor. "I know the trap will close on Berlin."

"Whom can we trust?" Raziet whispered to me.

"Only yourselves." I told her. "Always be prepared."

A whistle made us jump from the smoking breach in the front line. Not hands, but two would do just fine. Ahead lay a long journey, and we had no chance to return to that cave and trace our footsteps and markers placed to get back to our own homeland and time. We weren't in a hurry.

"Foreign workers!" The cry went up from the Nazis we saw. "Workers from the Caucasus." Only now we were in the West Kafkas and we had come from the East Kafkas.

Mountain men were being brought into Germany to work in large numbers as the people were shouting why are their own commanders doing that when the war was in part about expelling large amounts of people considered foreign.

The Nazi's war was about excluding, segregating, and expelling people they didn't like, and made up labels and names that these people were not as good as themselves. That was an excuse to get them out so boundaries could be established, racial, land, and political. Once boundaries were in place like neat little lists, more living space would be provided for their own people, so the line went.

Tribesmen told me that a quarter of their labor force was made up of foreign workers and those who worked by force with no pay. The farms were "manned" by foreign workers supervised by farm women, old men, and boys. As more foreign workers, usually unpaid, were dragged into their country, the Nazi fears gave way to terror. And all along they started the whole thing by wanting to cleanse their country of foreign workers.

There's always a type of man—or woman, who had a need to wage war. It was as if his or her visual space or pattern of brain electricity radiated as so *understimulated* to begin with—in mind and pulse, that only to bring up the person to the level of well-being or normal, that individual had to wage combat.

The whole lot of us except my father, mother, and brother, stayed behind. Everyone else finally landed in one of the 22,000 camps in Germany. All the tribesmen we had camped with landed in Ohrdruf, a concentration camp for Russian and Mountain men and other minority groups.

Word got back to us that several days before the arrival of the troops of liberation. The Nazis brought out all their inmates of the camp to the square in the center of the camp and had killed them.

You can look this up for yourself, whatever time zone you're in now. It was reported by Vernon Kennedy, UNRRA Liaison Officer to the 12th Army Group in a memorandum detailing an inspection trip made from April 15 to 21, 1945. There were about 4,000 killed and 1,000 who survived this massacre, mostly people from the Kafkas or Rus.

So war is not what anyone would want to return to in any time zone. Well what happened was eerie. When it came to the Mountain men, some people had the idea that if they didn't want to return to Russia, then they must have collaborated with the Nazis.

Actually, they were afraid of being under the thumb of the Communists where they were treated badly. So one group of Mountain men refused to return to Russia and began to fight the liberating troops who only wanted to pick them up and free them so they could return to Russia. They wanted their own familiar mountains as a homeland.

Then word got around that a few distinguished Mountaineer generals who had fought on the side of the White Russians in the old Russian Civil

War had emigrated and held Austrian or German citizenship from the years before this war. These generals tried to intervene with the authorities.

They failed, and voluntarily returned with the others. As leading White "Russian" officers, automatic execution awaited these generals in Russia, but they voluntarily returned anyway. Then I heard what happened, all about the Mountaineer suicide rite, the 'adat' or unwritten law of the mountains that took hold. Their honor would not be defaced.

Well, we don't have any suicide rite of the mountains or the steppes. We have the Torah. The Sufis have their *Zikr* dance and writings. And they are our friends. That's what we answer to. So just after breakfast, Atokay raised a nervous fist and began to hammer on the door of the International Refugee Organization.

"Let me in, I tell you." He growled at the clerks.

"Stop that banging." The door opened a bit and Atokay put his foot in it. We stood behind him.

"War criminals, quislings, traitors!" We heard the shout go up around us.

The voices began, "Any other persons who assisted the enemy in persecuting civil populations or voluntarily assisted the enemy forces, ordinary criminals, and persons of German ethnic origins, whether German minorities in other countries, who have been transferred, evacuated, or have fled into Germany...."

"We are Jews with forged Tatar passports because the Germans aren't interested in Tatars." Nobody believed us in this time zone or in this longitude. We spoke too many languages and dialects.

"When they have acquired a new nationality, they become otherwise firmly established. When they have unreasonably refused to accept the proposals of the Organization for their resettlement or repatriation, or..."

The one in authority kept on reading, "When they are making no substantial effort toward earning their living when it is possible for them to do so, or when they are exploiting the assistance of the Organization."

Atokay sat next to his wife. The clerk warned him, "The main object of the Organization is to bring about a rapid and positive solution of the problem which will be just and equitable to all concerned.

The main task is to encourage and assist in every way possible early return to their countries of origin. No international assistance should be given to traitors, quislings, and war criminals, and nothing should be done to prevent in any way their surrender and punishment."

Atokay confronted the International Refugee Organization officer reading his constitution and explaining it to the others. "Stalin is exterminating

the Mountain Men in Russia because someone told him that a few sided with the Germans to get out from communism. Do you believe that story?"

The clerk cleared his throat. "The constitution provides for individual freedom of choice. We handle valid objections to repatriation."

A shuddering silence filled the room. Atokay watched the blue veins in his bare feet grow fat. "Persecution or fear based on grounds of persecution because of nationality provided these are not in conflict with the principles of the United Nations as laid down," the clerk continued to speak in a flat tone.

"Objections of a political nature judged by the Organization to be valid."

"What do you mean—valid?" Atokay questioned him.

"Do you believe the entire peoples of the North Kafkas or the émigrés who fled to Austria and Germany sided with the Germans to escape Russia's treatment of mountain people and Communism?"

"What should I believe when I see a few Mountaineer generals trying to help your people, Generals who had fled to Austria and Germany who were not judged to be of such an inferior "race" as the Nazis put it, that they were promoted to generals? What should I think?" The clerk's face blushed as he spoke to Atokay.

"We want the Kafkas to be free, that's all. We are not traitors, and we didn't fight for the Germans."

"Well, Turkey didn't exactly go with the allies either at the start of the war," the clerk answered.

"We're not Turks. We are Mountain Jews speaking Tat. And we came from Persia to the Mountains twenty-seven hundred years ago, through Azerbaijan."

"Some of the tribes of the North Caucasus do speak a Turkic language, but most speak one of the North Caucasus Mountains dialects."

"I know," the clerk said. "I also know you people sought independence under the protection of England and Turkey. That's the real reason Stalin killed 800,000 North Caucasus Mountains people and sent the remainder to prisons in Kazakhstan."

"There can be no religion under Stalin." Atokay bowed his head and pounded on the clerk's desk.

"Stalin is our ally," the clerk answered defiantly.

"Are you doing this to me to save your own face for the Soviet bloc?" Atokay turned and left.

"Wait," the clerk shouted. "We have responsibility for the care of more than seven hundred thousand refugees and displaced persons. We have a problem in France to take care of."

The clerk sat back uneasily. "Do you need medical services?" His blue eyes stared at Atokay and the rest of us standing behind him. What do you need? Blankets? A place to sleep? Name it."

"I'll name it," Atokay said in a shaky voice.

"You gave people like us to the highest bidder. Why are you treating us like next-to-nothings?"

"Don't tell me you have a sense of entitlement. You're like anyone else here. We're all equal." The clerk rubbed a spot in his shirt.

"Why are you blaming me?" Atokay paced restlessly as he spoke. "Why don't you blame it on the Cossacks?"

"Blame what?"

"Being traitors."

"The Cossacks aren't traitors."

"You know what I mean," Atokay said to him.

"How come you distribute cash grants and furnish legal assistance to the White Russians and others with Nansen passports and to the Spanish Republicans, but Mountain Men you treat like dirt?"

"Where did you learn that?" The clerk squinted at Atokay.

"From books and travels. You're not educated unless you have traveled like I have—everywhere."

Well, he hadn't traveled in time—the ultimate education. And I have. Atokay stared at the fluttering eyelids of the IRO officer. The officer poured eye drops into his eyes while the clerk shuffled papers in a file cabinet.

"We're cutting costs to the bone," the IRO officer said, looking at the clerk instead of Atokay who was talking to him.

"What does that mean for me? I'm interested in being resettled. I don't want to be repatriated. Little necessities like dental treatment and washrooms are for those not facing death as a traitor in Moscow. Where shall I go? What shall I do?"

The IRO officer yawned. "Maybe you should keep trying to settle in New York. My sister's American husband lives near Atlantic Avenue in Brooklyn, with all those Middle Eastern spice stores nearby."

"*Mumtaz Allah!*" Atokay raised his voice an octave. "I want my people's old flag back. It was the flag of a free Kafkas, symbol of unity. Our flag of 1830 was green with three crossed arrows and twelve stars, representing the twelve tribes and districts of the Northern Caucasus. Long live the valley of the apple trees, our capitol."

"Is that the city of Maikop?" The officer surmised.

The clerk intervened. "You should have thought of your beautiful valley of the apple trees that before you ran over to the Germans to be liberated

from them from Russia, our ally. You're always talking about the mountains, but now you want the valley of the apple trees as well? What's wrong with going back to Russia? You'll be repatriated to where you came from."

"I'm not Russian," Atokay shouted. "I'm a Mountaineer, a Moslem. Stalin wants to kill my people. Mikoyan and Molotov signed the secret orders to kill all of my people."

And what about my family I thought. There was a pause and then a bell.

"Calm down," the clerk sighed. "Don't act like you are going to kill yourself in front of our building. No employment is available, except with the Germans, and refugees are not required to accept such work."

"We are good men doing good deeds," Atokay begged and pleaded. "There's no sense in bad men doing evil. The charges are false that we sided with the Germans. We just came from fighting them in the mountains. Besides, there's a deserter from the German army hiding with us and helping us. We are not helping the men he deserted."

"You ran from communism to the first road to what you thought was freedom," the IRO officer added. "I understand. When the Nazis found you, they put you in work camps as their slaves. That's how they freed you from the Russians. "

Atokay looked at his people and took a vote. They sure didn't want to be repatriated back to Russia, and they didn't want the Nazis in their homeland, not with all the slave labor and the camps for their war machine. That was not their idea of a free Kafkas and free mountain nations—free from the communists. Not their idea of freedom at all....Darkness began to creep along the valley. You call this peace? With a country this peaceful, who needs war?

Deportees marched into empty cattle cars filled to overflowing, locked, and sealed. Most of the Crimean Turks we followed went to concentration camps in Sverdlosk Raion in the Urals. Most died of the hunger and disease brought on by slave labor. A small minority fled to Turkestan.

So many tribes were loaded up and deported. They were the Chechen, Ingush, Karachay, Balkars, Tatars, and Mountain men. Then of course, there were millions of Jewish people from all over Eastern Europe that outnumbered all the tribes of the Caucasus, but the Russians did not deport Jews in huge numbers at that moment.

The Nazis did. Russians deported peoples of the Caucasus, and they used the excuse to deport them that a few had been traitors, looking up to the Nazis to rescue them from the Russians' Communist rules.

Life cannot be contained in a small space. It's the old nomadic reach fighting against the need of the settled farmer to grow orchards and put down deep roots instead of far-reaching branches. You become the horizontal expression of your vertical wish to move up the ladder.

The earth has become too small to reach sideways. One stretch and you've squashed your palm into the face of the person next to you. Life on the Silk Road as a nomad has become too complex.

Dear Diary, even now, I feel the closing in of compartments, the containment of life in small spaces. I have only the personal space of my own limited to what I can carry in my pockets. We formed a human chain, hand in hand and tied a rope around each of our waists to keep together in a line. As darkness fell, we were back in the cave where I had tied my silver lace in little pieces of fabric all along the route. I knew where the road split in two and had tied a bouquet of flowers on a post to mark the route back home to my own time and place.

We trekked through the winding paths, beyond the stalagmites and stalactites. I checked each tiny piece of silver lace to keep on the trail. Finally, we came to the dark opening in the cave. There were old paintings there as we lighted a torch of twisted reeds to see our way and feel for the sharp wind and the pulse in the fabric of time at the opening of the time travel entrance. We and they are steppe sisters.

The torchlight threw eerie shadows on the walls. Someone had painted horses and bison on those caves, and part of the cave was under water. We walked for hours until the waterline and the rock that I marked to show the opening into time began to pulse in the opposite direction from the edges where it closed when we whirled out. I took a leap of faith, and I was in first, and then my brother tied in back of me, and all the rest.

So around we went, and through the maze of time. We floated and swam as if in a pond, a salty well of all beginnings. And we again where swirled through time.

In an instant the pulsing light and the walls of the cave closed in and expelled us beyond all time and space through a whirlwind. And faster and faster we spun like *dreidles* (Festival of Lights tops) on Hannukah.

We were great spinning tops and floating kites of the children of the Silk road with our healing acupuncture needles with which we travel the world. We spun and spun until we were almost fabric woven into the cloth of time ourselves, this long chain of human longing. We wove ourselves through the fabric of time not like in the 1940s, but more like futuristic nonstick frying-pan crystals retreating from a frying egg. Yes, as I look at this pan decades later, we also had to have a nonstick future in a flypaper universe.

Out we leaped, rolling like boulders onto the soft summer petals.
Daylight soothed us now, early morning with the rollaway sun's rays firing
from our fingertips. And mist on the meadows showed us that we were
reborn.

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Anne Hart